Transformation of the South African schooling system

Transformation in the school environment – an analysis of photographs from one rural secondary school

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List of acronyms

SGB School Governing Body

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About the publication

In 1997, the CEPD and its partner organisations (the Education Policy Units based at the Universities of the Witwatersrand, Natal and Fort Hare) embarked on a major longitudinal study – Education 2000 Plus. The study sought to track and examine the transformation of the schooling system in South Africa, focusing on the policies and programmes of the new government. The study was undertaken over a period of five years, and several intermediate reports emerged as the study progressed.

Towards the end of the study, the team spent a year examining and analysing the data, with a view to sharing the findings of the study with regard to the extent, nature and direction of education transformation in South Africa, specifically in relation to the schooling system.

The papers in this series – *Transformation of the South African Schooling System* – reflect on that process. The papers in this series have undergone a several review processes. Firstly, they were all presented at a national conference that was held in 2004. Following comments that were received at the conference, the papers were revised. The papers were then given to two independent reviewers.

The ten papers in the series have all undergone the review processes discussed above. Each of these papers provides an account of the transformation processes relating to the schooling system. The titles in this series are as follows:

1. Change Agents in the South African Schooling System: Challenges and Prospects, *George Moyo*
2. "Transformation" Revisited, *Enver Motala*
3. Transformation in the School Environment: An Analysis of Photographs from One Rural Secondary School, *Jenni Karlsson*
4. Exploring the Mutability of School Ethos during South Africa's First Post-apartheid Decade, *Jenni Karlsson and Sandile Mbokazi*
5. Prospects and Challenges of Doing Social Justice Research: Experiences from the Education 2000 Plus Study, *Madumetja Kgobe and George Moyo*

6. Policy Change and the Experiences of Learners in Post-apartheid Schooling, *John Pampallis and Princess Tabata*
7. The Fault-lines in South African School Governance: Policy or People?, *Veerle Dieltiens*
8. Districts: Looking for a Place in the Education System, *Hersheela Narsee*
9. Teacher Professionalism and Education Transformation, *Julie Douglas*
10. Selected Macro-indicators of Education Transformation, 1 991-2001, *Monica Bot*

Each of these papers reflect the multiple dimensions of the change processes, and the many aspects and features of transformation. Collectively, the papers suggest that important achievements have been made in driving education transformation towards an open, democratically organised quality for all, although major challenges remain.

Introduction

One of the chief concerns of South Africa's government over the last decade has been to improve conditions in the public school environment in order to diminish inequalities between schools. This has led to at least two national surveys to register school needs and measure the extent to which their material conditions and infrastructures are improving (Human Sciences Research Council *et al*., 1997; Department of Education, 2001). These surveys have focused on the most glaring and easily measurable features of inequality: water, toilets, power supply, telephones, specialised facilities such as libraries and laboratories, and the general condition of buildings and sports grounds. What is not registered in such surveys, and perhaps cannot be measured by national surveys, are how everyday practices of people are transforming: the individual school manager's interplay with education professionals and their interface with support staff, their engagement with learners and interaction with parents and the community. Such practices constitute the personal quotidian experience of school and play a significant and intimate role in shaping young lives. How everyday practices are being transformed in the school environment is difficult to measure and research in the approximately 30 000 public schools in South Africa. My intention in this article is to explore changes in the school environment in a qualitatively different way than the national school needs survey. My methodology draws on content and discursive analyses of spatial practices, rather than on the blunt indicators of quantified school needs. Despite these methodological differences, I share the concern for social transformation to eradicate the injustice of inequality, which is at the heart of the national surveys.

The underlying premise of my qualitative exploration of the school environment is that there is a relationship between politics and social space. 'School' is commonly understood to mean an education institution that has staff and learners who meet in classes for teaching and learning activities that are driven by the curriculum and by assessment. The school environment, then, is usually understood as referring to the space or site of the school. My qualitative approach in this article deepens the construct of the school environment as a physical space by thinking of the school site as a

social space. In social space there is interaction and dialogue, change and transformation, struggle and resistance, the practice of culture, identity and power, social reproduction and hegemony. By exploring the dynamic and fluid social space of the school environment and discussing its continuities and discontinuities, this article begins to expose the value-laden spatial practices that insinuate their way into the experiences of those who spend time at school, and become entrenched in their lives. Understanding the politics of spatial practices at schools casts the work of the policy maker in a new light and challenges our expectations of how transformation manifests and suggests new ways to research social transformation.

The social space of school encompasses the school's physically experienced built environment of entrances, playgrounds, classrooms, toilets and so on. This is the first-experienced and most-understood dimension of school space.

A second dimension includes many abstract and representational spaces. Textbooks, learning resources, policy documents and equipment are the abstract space that we commonly refer to as the curriculum. Though these objects manifest physically, they represent society's codified knowledge, values and attitudes. We can say that a place such as the principal's office is a representational space because for many people it evokes respectful behaviour. For them it represents leadership, authority, access to greater knowledge, opportunities, and perhaps even government. Some may even give that office a wide berth for the fearful memories represented by 'The Principal's Office'.

The third dimension of school space is spatial practices – that is, how space is used to shape the way people relate to one another and to constitute their power relations. For example, when a principal stands on a raised platform to speak at a school assembly, the elevated position of the principal in relation to everyone else signals and configures the power and authority differential between the principal, learners and teachers.

Having distinguished these three spatial dimensions of the physically perceived, imagined and practiced school, we can begin to approach the question of transformation in the school environment.

Transformation of Public Education

In South Africa there is no consensus about what constitutes social transformation. Scholars such as Richard Pithouse (2002) contend that South Africa's transformation is proving to be a mix of neo-liberalism and multi-racial elite pacting. While I agree with this critique, the conception of social transformation that the Education 2000 Plus project pursued is referenced to values and social goals of democracy and human rights.

Why is the discursive emphasis in this article on 'transformation' rather than 'reform', which is the more common term in international education literature? Education reforms are recalibrations in explicit and discrete systems or programmes such as school funding, curriculum or modes of initial teacher education, whereas the term education transformation signifies more comprehensive change that should pervade the entire system. Transformation implies a paradigm shift in social values, principles and philosophy. In the context of South African education, transformation is a national project. The purpose is not merely to displace apartheid ideology and to reform education. Rather it seeks to transform education fundamentally through the eradication of apartheid ideas and practices. The process is pervasive and incremental. Each reform initiative shifts the system away from the values and social goals of apartheid and moves practice progressively towards a system characterised by democracy and human rights (Karlsson, 2001a). Thus, transformation is a process achieved through successive and coherent reforms.

The French spatial theorist, Henri Lefebvre (1991:54), makes the important link between the transformative paradigm shift and the environment when he asserts that 'a revolution that does not produce a new space has not realized its full potential' For South Africa this implies that if apartheid-era inequalities continue to manifest in school environments and spatial practices, then the transition from apartheid to the new dispensation of democracy and human rights has not been completed in the education system. However, we should note that not all changes to the environment and spatial practice signify social transformation. Physical change

may be the slow deterioration due to neglect and climatic conditions over time. Also, disruptive change in the social environment, which unsettles the status quo, may indicate a contestation and politics of space among social agents. By disrupting the social order in the environment, social groups may be responding to a new political order by celebrating or resisting it, and reworking or reconfiguring space to advance their interests or dominance.

Several education policies introduced since 1994 provide a platform for the transformation of the school environment. For example, among the governance functions devolved to school governing bodies (SGBs) by Section 21 of the *South African Schools Act* (Republic of South Africa, 1996) is responsibility to maintain and improve school property, buildings and grounds. If SGBs have access to sufficient financial resources, this power offers them the prospect of customising their school precinct and material conditions as they see fit. This governance policy will yield change in public school environments, but it also carries the danger of deepening inequality between schools (Karlsson, 2001b). Another example of an education policy that has potential to transform the school environment is the *National Norms and Standards for School Funding* (Department of Education, 1998). This policy aims to address financial inequality among public schools by allocating a greater proportion of state funds to previously under-resourced schools. These funds are for the basic maintenance and repair of school facilities, purchasing of learning and teaching support materials, and so on, so that school environments will improve materially.

In the context of South Africa's public education system, then, evidence of a transformed school environment – what Lefebvre calls a 'new space' – might be in materially improved teaching and learning facilities, in safety practices and materially secure learning conditions, and in a practice that establishes an inclusive space where there is tolerance of difference and appreciation of diversity.

It is this conceptual horizon and theoretical relation of politics and space that frames my analysis of transformation in the school environment. This framing means that my methodological approach to examining school environments is to look at material evidence of spatial change, but also to delve beneath it to understand the deeper

connotation and discursive meaning of continuities and discontinuities in the school environment. This methodological approach is explained in the next section.

A methodology for examining school space

My approach to exploring the transformation of school environments is to use still photographs as fixed (i.e. immobile) observations of the school as a social space and as images that record evidentiary moments of practice, social interaction and power relations. Although this visual methodology is not widely used in educational research, it is useful for my analytical purposes, which concentrate on spatial practices and the school environment.

Most forms of data for educational research are word texts such as policy documents, interview transcripts and field notes. Indeed, it is only in the last two decades that social scientists have begun to regard photographs as more than supporting illustrations that substantiate findings from other forms of data, and which are researchable visual texts (for example, see the work of Chaplin, 1994; Banks, 1998, 2001; Prosser, 1998; Emmison & Smith, 2000; Burke & Grosvenor, 2001; Rose, 2001). The status that I give each photograph in this article is akin to that given to a conventional observation field note, which is, by its nature, subjective and partial. As such, I treat photographs as scientific data that are analysable.

In visual research, photographs are not merely 'pretty pictures' to break the textual monotony of a research report. Photographs are polysemic or multivocal in that, figuratively, they 'speak' in multiple ways. This metaphorical expression indicates that there are infinite positions from which photographs might be viewed, and innumerable moments in which they might be re-viewed, read, understood and interpreted (Prosser, 1992; Banks, 2001; Pink, 2001). My analysis of photographed spatial conditions and practices uses aspects of content analysis (Bell, 2002) and discourse analysis (Rose, 2001). For the purposes of this article, the issues of responsibility for generating and composing the photographs, where and when they were displayed and the material condition of each photograph *per se* were not relevant. Where necessary, I have drawn on case study reports for supplementary detail such as numbers of classrooms.

The photographs used as the data set for this article were gathered during the course of the Education 2000 Plus Project. The Project was longitudinal research undertaken by a partnership of five non-governmental organisations led by the Centre for Education Policy Development, and funded through the Royal Netherlands Embassy in Pretoria. Education 2000 Plus is widely recognised as the largest and most important national research project undertaken to explore and track longitudinally the transformation of the schooling system in South Africa during the first decade of its democracy.

In the large bank of data generated over the duration of the longitudinal study, there is a small collection of photographs. In that set, there is only one school that was photographed over the course of the longitudinal study. Therefore, for this article, I restricted my analysis of changes in the school environment to this one school, Karabo,[1] which is a rural secondary school in KwaZulu-Natal. Other schools were photographed, but those photographs were for one year of the longitudinal study only, making visual comparison across the period impossible.

In total, there are 59 photographs of Karabo Secondary School. Thirty photographs were taken in 1998, six in 1999, thirteen in 2000, and ten in 2002. No instrument was used to guide the researcher in which particular area and view to photograph. This unstructured *ad hoc* approach yielded photographs of different parts of the school environment. This prevents a simple comparative approach such as that used by Jon Rieger (1996) in his study of a small town in the United States. In that study Rieger systematically re-photographed over time the same view from the same particular position. The Education 2000 Plus photographs, derived through the unstructured *ad hoc* approach that yielded a disparate and uneven data set, push the analysis to emphasise discourse rather than content. In the next sections I discuss the findings, first as the descriptive baseline of 1998, and then as continuities and discontinuities in the school environment over the period of study.

[1] Fictitious names are used for schools.

Descriptive baseline of the Karabo Secondary School environment

During the visit to Karabo Secondary in 1998, thirty photographs were taken of the school. These photographs constitute the visual baseline of the school environment.

The school is located on three terraces cut into a hillside. In 1998 the main entrance to the schoolyard had no signage or fence although there were poles from a previous sign and fence. The gardens were well-maintained. There were twelve classrooms, two administration offices and a staffroom, all without ceilings. All the buildings were in need of repair to door handles, door locks and built-in stationery cupboards in classrooms. All windows, other than those of the former library, were glazed. There were window bars and security doors on all classrooms. However, many of these doors had either been pulled off their hinges or were without barrel bolts.

In classrooms the chalkboards were heavily pitted and used with difficulty. There were no chalk trays and the built-in stationery cupboards no longer had doors or shelves. The remains of broken shelves lay on the floor of the cupboards. The classroom walls were bare and uninspiring. There were no notice boards. The desks and benches in classrooms were fairly new, though one desk stood on the sunny and sheltered side of the Grade 12 classroom in full view of the staffroom. A room previously used as a library showed evidence of having been vandalised. Books lay strewn on the floor.

There were no specialist rooms such as a laboratory. The school had no electricity, running water or telephone. Where a netball court was once laid out, grass grew. Nearby there was a solitary pit toilet for staff use, and four or five bright blue plastic toilet cubicles stood disused because of inappropriate technology. For learners there were pit toilets in concrete enclosures. In a clerk's office there were several 20-litre buckets, which were used to fetch water from a borehole some distance from the school.

From a distance the neatly maintained school grounds suggested a form of order and normality. However, closer examination of the 1998 photographs showed that the school was severely under-

resourced and conditions were not conducive to teaching and learning.

Continuities in the school environment

In the annual sets of photographs taken between 1999 and 2002, the basic conditions at Karabo Secondary show no change. By the last visit in 2002 there was still no on-site water supply, electricity, telephone or hygienic toilets, and the built-in storage cupboards in classrooms were still broken. The vandalised library remained completely undisturbed since 1998. The school sign, which was missing in 1998, had not been replaced by 2002. Unlike the other schools of the longitudinal study, which were photographed in 2002, Karabo Secondary had no perimeter fence. The evident desolation and lack of intervention from any role player or stakeholder suggests that the school community is chronically debilitated and without resources, and also that they are relatively disengaged from the national transformation project.

Discontinuities in the school environment

Only five minor changes in the school environment were noted during field visits to Karabo Secondary in the four years following 1998. These were:

- The school buildings had been repainted, so that the school was improved in terms of its public appearance.
- The principal's office door had been repaired so that the contents were more secure.
- There was a notice board hung in the staffroom, to provide staff with information such as the timetable for classes and circulars from the district office.
- A daily staff register was in use for the administration of recording and monitoring attendance of employees.
- In one classroom learners' work was on display, hanging from the roof rafters; which is evidence of teaching and learning.

These modest changes in the material conditions and practices imply that the school management team and some teachers were making an effort to improve the school. The types of change concerned the public appearance and maintenance of property, security of information and resources, administrative procedures and pedagogic practice.

Repainting school buildings is an easy cosmetic change, although the school's meagre resources showed through in the poor quality paint that had washed off the weather-facing walls after only three years. Clearly this change in appearance was prioritised over the library, because a fresh coat of paint costs less than restoring a library. It is most likely, too, that the local parent community would have had no or little experience of a library when they attended school. This fair assumption means that they would have scant understanding of the valuable role of a library in the curriculum and its potential to improve learners' academic achievement. In addition to the cost factor, it would explain why the cosmetic appearance of the school was a priority rather than the substantive pedagogic improvement that a library would offer.

Repairs to the door of the principal's office were minor yet essential for security. The repairs and the staffroom notice board would not have required great expenditure from the annual budget either, and the school governing body would easily be able to effect these improvements. The staff attendance register photographed in the principal's office is a standard item of institutional stationery issued from the district office, though its regular use requires daily practice and this would require the school's leadership to institute a routine of signing in and out each day, and monitor that the system is maintained.

Lastly, in 2002 the samples of work on coloured sheets attached to the roof rafters of one classroom suggest that there was some change in at least one teacher's pedagogical practice since 1998. The hanging of the sheets, up and out-of-reach though not quite out of sight, implies that the teacher and learners feared theft and defacement if the papers had been put on the walls of the classroom.

In short, there were great continuities and minor discontinuities found in the environment of Karabo Secondary. What spatial changes there

were, such as the repainting of the school, were superficial. They were not strongly indicative of a school that is transforming in terms of improving teaching and learning facilities, providing safe and secure learning conditions and fostering an inclusive space where there is tolerance and understanding of difference among members of the school community.

Transformation of administration and management procedures require 'whole school' interventions that go beyond the superficiality of technical solutions of introducing monitoring and measuring instruments. As important as the building maintenance of a coat of fresh paint is, such improvements are not sufficient to guarantee a transformation of the school as a social space and the spatial practices of stakeholders and role players. Some members of that school community might dispute my analysis that repainting the school is a superficial change. Given the low base of advantage from which this school was first measured in 1998, the on-going limited financial resources available to the SGB in relation to local economic levels of the poor, rural community it serves, as well as localised customs and cultural values, the repainting might be a substantial achievement for Karabo's governing body. For them, the repainting might hold a comparatively different value and signification to that which I might give it as a middle-class researcher and education policy analyst from an urban centre.

Notwithstanding the possibility of divergent views about the reform of Karabo's environment, and that the extent of change is relative to the economic levels of the parent community and effective management prior to the longitudinal study, it was not possible to link environmental change to specific post-1994 transformative policies. What can be argued on the basis of visual evidence is that post-apartheid education policies as a whole have begun slowly and incrementally to influence the character and quality of school environments.

The devolution of power to SGBs since 1997 is allowing a localised customisation of school facilities and environments. The decision of some schools to fly the national flag must be seen as a localised choice and allocation of resources. However, the convergent evidence of an increasing number of computer-filled rooms for learners' use at primary schools is related to the centralising policy of

government's national curriculum for the twenty-first century (Department of Education, 2000) and its persuasive neo-liberal discourse about entering and competing in a global market. Some school governing bodies have greater capacity and capability to exercise their power effectively than others. Thus, we may see school environments manifesting greater divergence than convergence (uniformity) in the future.

What interventions and resources would be required to accelerate transformation in the school environment of Karabo Secondary School? The utilities and infrastructure of water, toilets, electricity, telephone and fencing require resources well beyond the reach of the local school community. Since it is a public school, the state and its agencies should provide the intervention and resources. For example, the provincial Departments of Works and Local Government should be collaborating and mobilising parastatals and the corporate sector to make such changes in the under-resourced school environment. Private enterprise is a source of public school signage, with the proviso that there is some benefit to the enterprise's commercial brands. Similarly, directorates within the provincial Department of Education, such as those responsible for school libraries and curriculum, should, through the expertise of the Department's district office, identify this as a school in need of additional resources and provide guidance, advice and resources that will improve the quality of teaching and learning in the classroom.

Marginalised and disadvantaged schools in rural areas, such as Karabo Secondary, cannot transform through their own initiatives entirely. Their transformation is contingent on agencies external to the local school community of staff and parents.

In closing

This article's contribution to the longitudinal study of how the public schooling system has been affected transformationally by post-1994 education policies is two-pronged. On the one hand I explored a relatively under-researched aspect of schooling (the school environment and spatial practices), and on the other I employed the under-utilised approach of a visual methodology.

My purpose in singling out the school environment is that the politics of space and the reproductive value of spatially embedded social relations are frequently overlooked, with the assumption that social space is value-free and neutral. Teachers' and learners' readings of their material conditions at schools are internalised and may be related to, and compared with, what they see at other schools. Over time this process shapes their self-positioning in the social hierarchy, with long-term and serious consequences as I have argued elsewhere (Karlsson, 2004). This is the reason why spatiality should receive greater attention from policy makers.

The under-utilised visual methodology concerned the use of photographs as scientific data for analysis. This methodological approach, which accepts the validity and vocality (or 'voice') of a visual text, was used to identify continuities and discontinuities in the school environment and to make meanings about the transformation of the school. Together the spatial and visual focuses of the article open up new ways of thinking about policy, how transformation manifests, and ways to research transformation.

Although the evidence of transformation at this disadvantaged rural school is minimal, it underscores the understanding that transformation concerns the redevelopment of a whole system and not just reform of one discrete component. Transformation that reaches into the heart of institutions and their cultures, and penetrates the walls of classrooms and teaching and learning practices, cannot be initiated and sustained by way of policy pronouncements or local energies and resources alone. It requires the collaboration of a range of social actors and development agencies that pool their resources and working towards a shared vision of quality schooling where everyone is included, and feels confident, accepted and secure.

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