Whose Theory of Participation?
School Governance Policy and Practice in South Africa

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Abstract
This article analyzes South Africa's efforts to promote broader participation in educational decision-making through local school governance structures in which parents serve as majority members. We utilize the "theory of action" framework to understand both government policy and school-level actors' meanings of two dimensions of governance: participation and representation. The analysis considers policy statements, government efforts to monitor implementation, and extensive data from parents, principals, teaches and learners in six diverse schools in two provinces. The "theory-in-use" among most of the school-level actors reflects the policy signals and dominates governance discourse. School governance and participation is being defined in very narrow terms that emphasize participation for efficiency reasons, rather than for democratic purposes. Parents' participation is framed by what principals view as appropriate within the boundaries of supporting the efficient running of the school. Truly re-defining roles of school level actors will require addressing power structures and conventions if it is to allow for the authentic participation of communities in the governance of schools.

Introduction
With the increasing decentralization of fiscal, political, and administrative responsibilities to lower-levels of government, local institutions, and communities, the notion of participation has taken on greater currency, emerging as a fundamental tenet in the promotion of the local governance of schools. Greater local participation serves the two main thrusts of the neo-liberal agenda, which appears to be driving most calls for greater decentralization, namely the promotion of "good governance" and the shrinking of the state and the expansion of private sector activity (Maclure, 2000). Many scholars have argued that masked by the language of "empowerment," the goals for greater local participation in school governance are managerialist effectiveness and financial efficiency (Gardner and Lewis, 1996). Furthermore, while there is some small-scale evidence to support the efficiency argument, the evidence for empowerment and democratization is often partial, tenuous and reliant on the rightness of the approach rather than on proof of outcomes (Cleaver, 1999).

This article examines South Africa's experience in promoting broader participation through the establishment of local school governance structures, a model designed with the expressed aim of contributing to the democratic transformation of South African society[1]. By exploring the theories of action (Argyris and Schön, 1974) underpinning the specification and interpretation of these policies in practice, we are able to assess the extent of transformation and the nature of participation in school governance. More

specifically, we examine whether local participation is limited to managerialist effectiveness or extends to a shifting of the locus of control over school governance to parents.

Analytic framework: Theories of action

A major criticism of the participation discourse is that it is based on a naïve understanding of power and the power relations that exist both between central and local actors and within local groups (Hailey, 2001). A participatory process may merely provide opportunities for the more powerful and serve to maintain exploitation and exclusion (Hildyard et al., 2001). By extension, we argue that a simplistic understanding of power and power relations characterizes views of the relationship between policy makers and local actors. Policy makers often equate policy intention with policy practice and exhibit a simplistic understanding of the motivations of individuals to participate. This denies individual agency as it relates to the construction of social structures and practices. In reality, school governance discourses are received in very different ways by individual members of school governing bodies depending on a variety of factors, not least individuals' own theories about governance. National policy mandates, such as the South African Schools Act (SASA) are but frameworks or national architecture that provide a rubric within which actors, based on their own theories of action continually design, enact, and reenact policy at all levels. This design, enactment and reenactment occurs at the level of the school and within the school governing body itself. Therefore, we deem it essential to go beyond an understanding of the policy intent and to view the various school-level stakeholders as active agents in the creation of their changing conceptions of school governance and participation. Their perspectives can be understood by an articulation of theories of action (Argyris and Schön, 1974) or '"cognitive maps" that constitute frameworks used to guide, interpret, and justify their actions (Spillane et al, 2002). Based on their particular theory, individual stakeholders adopt particular strategies to deal with changing governance demands.

In this paper we posit that particular theories of action, or maps that guide action, inform new educational governance policies in practice. The concept of theory of action provides a means to explore assumptions informing educational policies and practices at systemic, programmatic and individual levels. Within a theory of action, one may distinguish between theories that are explicit (espoused), and implicit (theories-in-use):

> When someone is asked how he would behave under certain circumstances, the answer he usually gives is his espoused theory of action for that situation. This is the theory of action to which he gives allegiance, and which, upon request, he communicates to others. However the theory that actually governs his actions is his theory-in-use, which may or may not be compatible with his espoused theory (Argyris and Schön, 1974: 6-7).

In the context of school governance, espoused theories may be likened to the intentions and functions that policy documents or actors assert are the objectives of school governance bodies, while the theories-in-use are linked to functions that are actually performed. A stated policy objective or intention of governance reform such as promotion of democratic practices may ignore the reality of "activities" in practice. For example, a reason often cited for the establishment of governing bodies (as in SASA) is

to extend democracy. But in reality their activities may be focused on supporting efficient functioning of the school organization with little regard to extending democratic participation.

School governance and decentralization policies typically are based on theories of action that presume that the institutionalization of local school autonomy will have broad effects on education. A tacit assumption made by most central policy makers involved in formulating and implementing large scale educational governance reform is that a universally applied remedy is received by local schools in uniform ways (Fuller and Rivarola, 1998). Yet, the outcomes of governance policies are far more complex and informed by more than a set of limited stated purposes. It is shortsighted to believe that a new policy will lead to the enactment of all changes it beckons (Sayed, 2002). Internal dynamics, institutionalized features of environments or sectors, and individuals' interaction with new governance policies condition their evolution and impact. Examining the espoused theories of action and the theories-in-use at a programmatic level (e.g. in terms of the stated rationale of SASA), and in terms of individuals who are involved in governance practices, enables us to develop a better understanding of participation. We turn briefly to discuss the theory of action informing the government's school governance policy before giving attention to the individual theories.

Theory of Action Behind the School Governance Policy

The elections of April 1994, which marked the formal end of apartheid rule and a shift from authoritarian to democratic rule in South Africa, introduced a new South African Constitution that included an unequivocal commitment to representative and participatory democracy, accountability, transparency and public involvement (RSA, 1996c). The essential vision is that people should participate beyond episodic national elections in shaping their destiny. Participation, it is suggested, does not extend simply to the right to elect representatives but translates into the right to influence decisions. The South African Constitution thus presents an interesting challenge in declaring that the new democracy is both a representative and a participatory one.

The challenge is taken up in education through various legislation[2], in particular by SASA (RSA, 1996b). SASA's espoused theory is to create a new school governance landscape based on citizen participation, partnerships between the state, parents, learners, school staff and communities, as well as devolution of power towards the individual school and community. SASA provides for the election of School Governing Bodies (SGBs) by learners, parents, and staff. In theory, it grants schools and their constituent communities a significant say in decision-making by devolving power to stakeholders who participate in "democratic governance" of schools. A basic set of functions is stipulated for all SGBs, including the determination of school admissions policy, setting language policy, recommending teaching and non-teaching appointments, managing finances, determining school fees, and conducting fundraising. These measures are intended to "advance the democratic transformation of society" (RSA, 1996b: Preamble). While promoting local democratic processes and parent/community ownership, the South African Government faces additional challenges of needing to integrate the historically decentralized system, improving the efficiency of the system, and redressing apartheid imbalances. The dual expectations of serving democratic transformation and financial efficiency through the capture of local

resources are evident in the twinning of decentralization policies for school governance and financing, particularly in SASA and National Norms and Standards for School Funding (DoE, 1998)[3].

Since 1996, government attention to governance in South Africa has focused on form, that is, on the formal articulation of rules, roles and responsibilities. The legislation related to governance largely articulates the structure, roles and functions of different levels of government: their composition, powers, channels of accountability, and rules guiding their operations. These prescriptions convey a singular sense of how the policy ought to be implemented. At the school level, the policy statements articulate and enforce a highly structural norm, viewing parental participation in school governance through a technocratic, apolitical perspective that privileges form and structure over local meanings and process. This approach gives little consideration to the practice of the policy across diverse, historically-situated contexts that characterize post-apartheid South Africa. And, because a single "right practice" is implied, no attention to process and contestation is required.

Moving from the explicit or espoused theory evident in policy texts to understanding the implicit or theory-in-use, we obtain some insights by examining government monitoring efforts and official "stocktaking of implementation". In these, the government has tended to concentrate on policy fidelity to the legal prescriptions and a technicist view of change. The 2003 Annual Survey for Ordinary School for the Department of Education's Management Information System (EMIS) contains a new section on SGBs that reinforces a preoccupation with compliance. There are 68 Yes/No questions asking if the school is complying with SGB legal requirements. The wording of some of the questions indicates a vision of a singular norm:

> 3.6.2 The SGB has a proper school development plan based on a properly conducted school audit. [1=yes; 2=no]

It is also clear that the central government sees that implementation difficulties can be solved through clarification of assigned roles, as these Yes/No questions in the 2003 Annual EMIS Survey indicate:

> 3.10.1 The SGB does not understand the role that it should play.
> 3.10.2 There is general confusion about the roles of the governance and management structures in the school and this confusion has led to tension and conflict.
> 3.10.3 There is slight confusion about the roles of the governance and management structures in the school that can be rectified by training.

This technical, structural perspective is further evident in the recent Review of the Financing, Resourcing and Costs of Education in Public Schools (DoE, 2003), which defined implementation problems as due to policy intentions having, "… been misunderstood by managers at the various levels of the departments, or at the school, perhaps because of insufficient explanation and socialisation from the DoE and the PEDS (Provincial Education Departments)." (DoE, 2003: 10) It was then suggested, "The

remedy may then be awareness campaigns, or a rewording, though not a redesign, of the policy." (DoE, 2003: 10)

Indeed, a considerable amount of analysis on SASA has focused on central government theories of action, that is, central government understandings of how the devolution of authority to schools will work[4]. However, continued focus on central government understandings is limiting and keeps researchers and policy analysts ensnared in an assessment of policy intents. Such a focus promotes implementation research that seeks to identify the policy-practice gap by determining whether the policy is implemented as intended (Grant Lewis and Motala, forthcoming). Rather, we need to understand the different meanings the policy has for diverse actors at various levels, by examining the multiple understandings of how it works and the practices that reveal different "theories-in-use." We turn to that now.

Theories of Action at the School Level

In the following section we explore the nature of participation in school governance in South Africa using data from a collective case study of six schools in Gauteng and KwaZulu Natal (Naidoo, 2004)[5]. The main focus is on stakeholders' "sense-making" or theories of action regarding two dimensions of school governance: participation and representation.

Participation

In examining school governance practices in South Africa, initially one gets a picture of increased involvement of parents in school governance, and the ideal situation of all stakeholders working together and making decisions by consensus in pursuit of a common interest. For example, the principal of one Black school[6] indicated that the different stakeholders in their SGB worked together as "basically there is a complimentary type of scenario where we need one another to advance the best interest of the school." Most stakeholders seem to deny school politics or diverse and competing constituent interests, values, and demands. Yet there is also much uncertainty about governance and, as a result, at most schools great effort is devoted to ensuring that the SGB is acting appropriately, as defined by the letter of the law. Election procedures are followed strictly, SGBs meet at least quarterly, meeting notices are sent out, minutes are kept, meetings are chaired by the parent SGB chairperson and so on. In effect the theory-in-use at most of the schools reflects the policy signals and dominant governance discourse, which emphasizes the value of participation on efficiency and democratic grounds. Different stakeholders referred to SASA as defining the purpose of the SGB, stressing that the law provided the opportunity for all stakeholders, but especially for parents, to be involved in school governance. The chairperson of one SGB emphasized, "The preamble to SASA gives you the purpose, the rationale, which is bringing the governance of schools into the hands of parents." The idea that the participation of the governed in their government is fundamental to active democratic citizenship is accepted without question and the discourse of participation has taken on the force of common sense without critical reflection on its practice. A principal insisted that there could be little opposition to parents being involved. This argument has been made in other contexts as well; in the United States the argument is often made that those closest to the action (educators and principals) and those with a direct stake (parents and learners) in schooling should have a strong voice in decisions (Anderson, 1998: 572). All

stakeholders come to espouse that participation, in theory, is "the cornerstone of democracy-a revered idea that is vigorously applauded by everyone" (Arnstein, 1969: 216). As a result, in their initial responses, all stakeholders emphasized the importance of parental participation in school governance, even if such buy-in is only rhetorical. However, a more in-depth interrogation of specific stakeholders' theories-in-use regarding parent and learner participation reveals that many stakeholders, particularly principals and educators, do not necessarily value participation in itself or for advancing democratic decision-making in school. In their practices, such participation is often little more than information sharing or limited consultation, promoted by principals and educators for how it can help the school or make their work easier.

A more in-depth study of specific stakeholders' views also reveals that participation by parents in governance is individualistic and sporadic, depending almost entirely on the good graces of principals or the initiative of individual parents, who may or may not have the power to challenge existing patterns of participation. Furthermore, participation is limited to certain issues determined by the principal and/or the parent serving as SGB chairperson. In general, SGB parent members did not supervise management nor were they involved in broad policy-making. Across all the schools studied, but to a lesser extent at the former Model C schools[7], learners and parents faced real challenges in expressing their voices in governance through the SGB. These challenges were emphasized in such comments as, "The SGB doesn't involve all the parents," "The SGB is easily manipulated," and "The teachers dictate the terms in the SGB." In such an environment, it is hardly surprising that few school or community stakeholders envisaged participation in school governance in terms of democratic objectives and greater community involvement in decision-making. The majority accepted that their role, as one parent put it, "is to see to it that the school runs smoothly". Some parents did, however, attempt to fashion an expanded role for parents. For example, the Chairperson at Eastern Secondary described the parents' role in the following all-encompassing terms, "As a parent on the governing body, you have to make sure that parents are visiting the school and make sure that the parents know about the kids' problems in the school. You have to see that teachers are teaching our kids and that the district is delivering. The other part is to address the needs of the community." Clearly there is an expectation on the part of some parents, in contrast to other school stakeholders, that the SGB has a broader role and should not be limited to supporting efficient management of the school. In general, though, most parent SGB members tended to define the role of the SGB more narrowly, in terms of the support it could provide the school. The expression of parental voice is hindered as parents are obliged to adopt the theory-in-use that efficient management is equivalent to school and community interests. The defining conception of the SGB is echoed by one principal who said, "The community needs to be conscientised about their role. They have to understand that being on the SGB means helping to make sure that the school runs properly."

While some educators saw the participation of parents as beneficial, they were concerned about parents overstepping their boundaries. One teacher explained that the SGB should "see to the smooth running of the school's administration but there are some other grounds where the SGB shouldn't be in such as managerial matters." Many teachers clearly felt uncomfortable with SGB involvement in what they defined as

professional matters, and according to one principal, teachers viewed parent participation "as interference of parents who are not educated." Tensions between educators and parents are exacerbated by some teachers' references to the SGB as the "parents' body," an act that sidelines the SGB, setting it apart from the "real work" of other, perhaps more legitimate bodies, such as Site Councils and School Management Teams led by teachers. Some teachers were positive about the SGB, viewing it as a necessary mechanism for democracy, but they feared that parent participation was constrained because, "The teachers dictate the terms in the SGB. We have political power. The parents always endorse our position." This raises questions about what is meant by participation and its connection to spheres of influence in schools. Clearly participation is not dependent on membership of the SGB alone or attending meetings; it also depends on who has power.

Although what it means "to participate in governance" is variously interpreted by parents, learners, teachers and principals, currently principals' definitions are most dominant. Despite explicit regulations as to who should participate and how, participation in practice is structured and institutionalized through the actions of principals who define who participates, how they participate, and what decisions are open to participation. Almost all principals felt that the SGB's purpose was "to run the school in the correct manner according to the rules we have been given by the department;" to ensure that necessary resources are available; and, equally importantly, to assist in creating a school environment with limited conflict between various stakeholders. This raises the question of whether SGBs are really intended to give parents a voice, or whether they are there simply to serve as a mechanism to contain parental discontent and ensure that additional resources are available to the school. Parents' participation in particular depends significantly on what they are "allowed" to do by principals. School personnel appear not to want parental involvement beyond token involvement in fund-raising and other support activities, inhibiting parent involvement in decisions about curriculum and school organization. Most stakeholders tend to accept roles defined for them and do not interrogate the prevailing discourse of participation. In many schools, participation often translated to little more than sharing information or consulting parents on issues deemed to be in the school's interest. Such participation, corresponding with rungs 3 and 4 on Arnstein's (1969) "Ladder of Citizen Participation," represents tokenism, but is above non-participation. It allows the have-nots to hear and to have a voice, although they lack the power to ensure that their views will be heeded by the powerful (Arnstein, 1969: 217)[8].

From the espoused theories of various stakeholders, one gets a picture of SGBs functioning in an open and democratic manner, with widespread consultation among all the stakeholders and on-going attempts to reach decisions by consensus. In almost every school the decision-making process appears to be similar to that described by the principal of a township school, "A proposal is put forward, we discuss, motivation is given and we reach a decision through consensus." However, in practice the consultation process is managed by the principal, all stakeholders are not equal participants, and consensus is often more illusory than real. Furthermore, "consensus as a decision-making rule," one of the common unwritten rules of engagement that is perceived by SGB members as democratic, may actually cement the power of principals and impede democracy by privileging the status quo. Not all members of the

community are affected in the same way or benefit equally from every SGB decision but SGB members are under pressure to reach a decision the same way on all issues (McDermott, 1999). In effect the theory-in-use serves to define certain boundaries and ensure a more passive role for parents and learners, and for the SGB as a whole, in the governance of the school.

Representation

SASA is committed to representation in governance of stakeholders, defined as groups (parents, learners, and school personnel) who affect or are affected by the goals, policies, practices, actions and decisions of the school. The weighted electoral arrangements in favor of parents is "to involve parents more in school governance, enabling them to actively support schools" (DoE, 1997: 1) with the expectation that the SGB would represent the school community as a whole. There is no expectation that SGBs would constitute microcosms of the school community. SASA's definition of constituency, which complicates the issue of representation in practice, is reflected in the two intersecting notions identifiable in the way SGB members speak about representation, namely "Idealized School Community as Basis for Representation" and "Stakeholder Group as Basis for Representation."

The notion of a homogeneous community, expressed in all the study schools, denies complex issues of school politics or diverse, competing constituent interests, values, and demands. In reality, the diversity of school communities in South Africa cover the demographics of race (including color and ethnicity), culture, language, socio-economic status, religion, gender, sexual orientation, and location (urban and rural). The diversity of the ex-Model C/HOD/HOR schools is starker in terms of race and language differences, and the spread of where the learners live. Yet the diversity in terms of language, culture, and socio-economic levels are true for all schools. The diversity is further accentuated by the fact that the communities are ever changing with the upwardly mobile moving to those schools that are perceived as providing a higher quality of schooling. Representation is particularly problematic in these privileged schools, where the "school-as-community" is narrowly drawn and is restrictive and exclusionary. For example, the principal of one former Model C School said, "The nice thing, living in a small community, we know the people in the area. We know if a person is applying for fee exemption but is running a ski-boat and that sort of stuff." This definition of the school community conflicts with the reality that at least 50% of the students (Black, Colored and Indian)[9] come from as far as 15 miles away, many of whom still live in segregated Black townships. In general at the former White, Colored and Indian schools, the dominant groups who play a big role in defining "community" seek to sustain its historical identity.

Although the community and common interest metaphor was dominant, some stakeholders are beginning to define representation in terms of their responsibility to a particular constituency, for example parents, learners or educators. Even then "representing parents" or "representing teachers" raises another issue: stakeholder groups are not homogeneous. Even if some parents see themselves as representing all parents, they may represent particular parent interests. Across the schools the interests of the poor are articulated and defined for them by the middle-class (the Black educator

middle-class in Black schools and the White, Colored or Indian professional middle-class in mixed schools).

The majority of stakeholders, especially principals, felt that the SGB represents "their constituency" because they had an "elected SGB that is there to support the school." For many, to have held elections and formed an SGB with representatives of each type of stakeholder meant representation had been achieved. The idea of stakeholder groups as the basis for representation intersects with the idea of idealized communities as the basis for representation. Both ideas work to homogenize the parent community even though internal cleavages and stratification remain pronounced-particularly across the divides of race, class, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation and ability (Fakir, 2003). This may be a form of "privileging unity," which refers to the assumption that there always exists the idea of common good involving shared common interests and agreement on principles and policies. This is problematic for three reasons: (1) common good may serve to exclude; (2) it is likely to reflect the interests and perspectives of the historically dominant groups; and, (3) the less privileged may be asked to put aside their identity, experience and goals for the sake of the common good (Young, 2000).

Conclusion

We conclude that South African government efforts to broaden participation in educational governance is serving technocratic, efficiency ends rather than broadening participation in any authentic way. To date SASA is not translating into the empowerment of school communities or stimulating substantial organizational changes. Rather, the initiatives are serving to reinforce existing patterns of power and privilege in schools and in the broader society. Our study suggests that one of the main reasons for this is that, at all levels of the system, devolved school governance and participation of the school community in decision-making is being interpreted in a strikingly narrow way. The capacity to influence decision-making has been viewed in a formal, quasi-legalistic sense, restricted to institutional roles defined externally or defined by the most powerful actors at the school.

In asking such questions as "what does governance mean?" and "who governs and how?" analysis has generally failed to consider that actual practices of governance emerge out of actors' theories of action in particular localized struggles. While SASA and such policy prescriptions provide the template of "how governance should work," the definition of roles in practice is not a simple matter of learning one's role, mastering technical skills, or following official procedures. It involves some conflict, negotiation, and compromise. The lack of authentic participation by parents and learners reinforces the efforts of policy makers, principals, and administrators to equate democratic school governance with rational decision-making, minimal conflict, and decisions by consensus. Any re-definition of roles has to confront established power structures and conventions and their obsession with managerial and organizational efficiency, as these are often antithetical to genuine broad-based participation of local communities.

Notes

1. South Africa is a valuable case in point because it has moved further than any other sub-Saharan African (SSA) country in introducing, on a national level, school-based governance and financing. While more than 25 SSA countries have implemented one or more major decentralization initiatives (Naidoo, 2001), South Africa's attention to both financing and governance is unusual. African countries have tended to move either towards administrative decentralization with limited school-level authority or towards devolution of school financing to a sub-national level of government. However, the pressure to introduce market mechanisms into public school systems is strong in many SSA countries with insufficient public resources, declining quality and policy agendas set increasingly by international financial institutions. We can expect that many African countries will watch the South African experience with interest.

2. Major policy reforms affecting the structure and processes of education and training were introduced. Legislation including the White Paper on Education and Training (DoE, 1995), the South African Qualifications Act (RSA, 1995) and the National Education Policy Act (RSA, 1996a), and South African Schools Act (RSA, 1996b) gave legal effect to the new policies.

3. SASA assigns significant, some say onerous, fundraising and financial management responsibilities to SGBs. The National Norms and Standards for School Funding details how funding policies will address Apartheid inequities while improving efficiency. Several analysts have been concerned about the relationship between school financing models and democratic participation. See Sayed, 2001; Porteus and Tshoane, 2001; Karlsson, McPherson and Pampallis, 2001.

4. Studies focused largely on analyses of legislation, policy documents, and frameworks include work by De Clercq (1998, 2001), Karlsson, McPherson and Pampallis (2001), Sayed (1995, 2001), and Tikly (1997). Grant Lewis and Motala (forthcoming) argue that this research has reinforced government obsession with assessing policy fidelity and led to rationalist prescriptions from researchers and policy makers.

5. The data on the six schools are from Jordan Naidoo's dissertation research in fulfillment of the D.Ed. at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. The field visits were over a six-month period in South Africa in 2002. The study schools were selected according to level of school and community resources; mix of former apartheid education administrations; and geographical location. The schools were compared by: responses to the new governance policies; interpretation of policies, behavior and attitudes relating to governance; and, organizational governance practices.

6. In the six schools in the study, several former apartheid departments are represented. The Department of Education and Training (DET) was responsible for the governance and management of education for Blacks/Africans outside the so-called "Bantustans" or "Homelands." The House of Delegates (HOD) refers to the

apartheid structure responsible for schools for Indians and the House of Representatives (HOR) was responsible for schools for Coloreds. Schools for Whites were the responsibility of the provincial department of education. Urban Black residential areas are predominantly townships, racially segregated areas established by the apartheid government. All three of the Gauteng schools in the study are township schools.

7. The Clase Models (A, B, C and later D) introduced in 1990 by the Apartheid government set a new policy for "White" state schools. Model C (semi-private/semi-state option) was a state-aided school run by the management committee and principal, with the power to appoint teachers, decide on admission policies, and set fees.

8. Arnstein's much-quoted "ladder of public participation" consists of eight rungs, which depict what she considered to be an "elevating" framework of meaningful public interaction with planners. Rung 5 of the ladder is a higher-level tokenism that allows the have-nots to advise but the power-holders retain the continued right to decide. The top three levels of the ladder (rungs 6, 7, and 8 of partnership, delegated power, and citizen control) mean that the have-nots obtain full managerial power.

9. The use of these racial categories and classification are not supported by the authors, but reflect the racial categories that underpinned Apartheid policies. The terminology endures in the new South Africa.

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