

## What the U.S. Could Learn from South Africa about Education and Social Justice

By Sue Books  
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Educational policy and practice has resided and continues to reside at the vortex of social and political strife in South Africa, as in the United States. The political foundations of education in South Africa were perhaps never more evident than in 1976 when students in Soweto rebelled against the National Party's declaration that Afrikaans would become the language of instruction for mathematics and social studies in Black high schools. That rebellion helped to undermine the apartheid regime, which finally lost power to the African National Congress (ANC) 18 years later. One of the Nationalist government's greatest failures, education, arguably is now one of the ANC's greatest challenges (van Schalkwyk, 1998).

During Sue's six-month stay in Pretoria in the summer and fall of 2007, she and Thembi talked with 29 teachers working in a range of demographically and economically diverse schools across South Africa.<sup>1</sup>

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Asked about their aims and objectives as educators, the teachers overall expressed support for the momentous transformation in which South Africa is engaged. Yet this desire was tempered by anxieties among many of the White teachers about the implementation of a national curriculum and teaching philosophy that many seemingly do not fully understand or like, and by frustrations among many of the Black teachers with the slow pace of redress and broader social change. Almost all of the Black teachers shared cries for concrete help: Schools need more resources, classes are overcrowded, basic school infrastructure is missing, startling numbers of children have lost their parents to HIV and AIDS and are now caring for themselves and their siblings, primary school students are targeted by drug dealers, and so on. As a teacher in a rural school in the province of Mpumalanga put it, “We don’t feel the change. We now have democracy, but we’re still in the same schools. We still have the same families, the same parents who are still poor.”

Although the sample of teachers is clearly too small to reach definitive conclusions, the teachers’ comments suggest a philosophical divide within the education profession that has important implications—both as a “report card” on the educational reforms that have been made in South Africa, especially with respect to funding, and with respect to educational reform in other countries, including the U.S. Holding up South Africa as a mirror, we see more clearly a schism within the profession of education in the U.S.—a schism born of differential access to the “culture of power” and a “silenced dialog” about its educational significance (Delpit, 1988). Although school poverty and inequities among schools in the U.S. pale in comparison to conditions in South Africa, the two nations have much in common, including histories of state-sanctioned segregation in schooling as well as halting efforts to refashion those systems without undermining structures of advantage (Ball, 2006; Russo, Beckmann, & Jansen, 2005). Our purpose in this article, however, is not to compare U.S. and South African teachers’ views of educational reform, but rather to consider the broader significance of the South African teachers’ experience of educational reform—specifically, lessons U.S. policymakers might learn from these teachers about education and social justice.

As a context for exploration of the teachers’ comments about their aims as educators, the sections that follow offer a brief overview of the political and historical circumstances of schooling in South Africa and a short discussion of the theoretical foundations and methodology of the study. The article concludes with discussion of the significance of the teachers’ comments for those seeking educational reform that leans towards social justice.

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### Schooling in South Africa

The *Bill of Rights* in the *Constitution of the Republic of South Africa* (1996) affirms the right “to a basic education, including adult basic education, and to further education, which the state, through reasonable measures, must make progressively available and accessible” [Section 29(1)(a)]. In response to this constitutional promise, the new government introduced a range of reforms intended to rectify

the gross inequities of apartheid education. These inequities included per-pupil spending ten times greater for White students than for Blacks, stark differences in teacher qualifications in the Black and White schools, marked differences in teacher pay even when there were no differences in qualifications (Black teachers still were paid less), and a curriculum designed to inculcate the government's racist views (Thompson, 2000). The so-called Bantu Education system under which Blacks were educated "deliberately neglected education in science and mathematics and rested on a racist anthropology designed to generate cheap labor for what remained a colonially organized economy" (Asmal & James, 2001, p. 186). In 1995, 19% of the population had no formal education, and 92% of this 19% were Black Africans (Asmal & James, 2001). The new education system brought an amalgam of 17 separate and highly unequal race-based school systems under a national umbrella, with one national and nine provincial departments of education. Nine years of schooling were made compulsory, a national curriculum was adopted, and a new scheme for school funding was established.

In the early 1990s, when the apartheid state was crumbling, the government allowed parent bodies to change their school's legal status and thereby permit any student to enroll. Four options were provided, including becoming an independent (private) school. When restructuring was complete, 96% of the White schools had opted to become "state-aided." This was the Model C option, which permitted schools to admit Black students up to 50% of their maximum enrollment and to charge fees. With this structure already in place, the new government commissioned a panel of experts to make recommendations about school funding. The panel (known as the Hunter Committee) endorsed a "partnership funding" approach, including user fees and private contributions, with the caveat that children whose families could not or did not pay the fees should not be expelled (Roithmayr, 2003). The Department of Education also sought advice from two international consultants, who recommended that schools be allowed to charge fees of families who could afford to pay, in part as a way to keep "important stakeholders"—i.e., the White middle and upper classes—"fully engaged with public education, leading to better budgets and accountability" (Roithmayr, 2003, pp. 51-52).

The resulting legislation, the *South African Schools Act* of 1996 (known as the *Schools Act*), extended the option of charging fees to all public schools and made it illegal for schools to turn away learners whose parents or caretakers could not or did not pay the fees.<sup>2</sup> A provision added in 1998 requires School Governing Bodies (SGBs) to grant full or partial exemptions to families whose incomes fall below thresholds linked to the size of the fees. The *National Norms and Standards for School Funding* accompanying the *Schools Act* require the progressive redistribution of funding for books and other school supplies to favor the neediest learners. However, these supplies constitute only about 10% of school budgets; most of the remainder goes to educator salaries (Veriava, 2007).

Amendments to the *Schools Act*, implemented in 2006, strengthened regulations around fee exemptions and allowed the minister of education to declare

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some schools “no fee,” provided these schools receive “adequate” state subsidies. Although national funding norms have been established as adequacy benchmarks, provincial departments of education are not required to adopt them—hence the possibility of “inadequate” subsidies (Veriava, 2007). For 2009, schools serving 40% of all learners were forbidden to charge fees, and schools serving another 20% of learners chose not to charge fees. “No fee” schools receive significantly higher state subsidies than other schools, but these subsidies do not match the revenue generated by user fees.

How is the South African education system faring today? The increasing number of “well-heeled foreigners” enrolling their children in South Africa’s elite independent schools suggests that the top schools in the nation rival the best in the world (Blaine, 2007b). However, these schools educate very few South Africans. Although more children and youth in South Africa are attending primary, secondary, and tertiary institutions than ever before, many learners are dropping out of school after grade 10. In 2007, 31.5% of all 18-year-olds were out of school—a percentage that has increased since 1996 when 24.3% of all 18-year-olds were not attending school (Statistics South Africa, 2007). An international comparison of children’s reading skills (Mullis, Martin, Kennedy, & Foy, 2007) found that South African students scored lowest among 40 participating countries. According to this study, almost 80% of primary school pupils in South Africa are below the lowest benchmark.

Pro-poor funding policies are slowly making school resourcing more equitable (Gustafsson & Patel, 2006). Nevertheless, stark disparities in funding and school conditions persist (Fiske & Ladd, 2004), and arguably have now been “locked in” through the fee-based structure of funding (Roithmayr, 2003). Although state subsidies favor the poorest schools, the ability to levy fees gives schools in middle-class and wealthy communities an enormous advantage. Many SGBs use their fee revenue to hire additional teachers (Fiske & Ladd, 2004). At some of the wealthier schools, “SGB teachers” comprise more than half the staff. Consequently, principals in the higher quintile schools act as full-time administrators whereas principals of schools in rural areas routinely teach, some for most of the day.

School infrastructure improved markedly between 1999 and 2006 (Department of Education, 2007). Among other measures of progress, the percentage of overcrowded schools fell from 51% to 24% of all schools. Still, as of 2006, almost 12% of South Africa’s 25,145 schools had no water, almost 17% had no electricity, and just over 5% had no toilets. Of the schools with toilets, 60 were using the “bucket system” and 8,509 had only pit latrines. In the Eastern Cape, one of the poorest provinces, 40% of the schools were judged to be in poor condition. In the nation overall, only 7% of the schools had adequate libraries, and only 10% of all secondary schools had functioning labs. Almost 70% of the schools had no computers, and only 2% were equipped for disabled learners.

By law, all public schools in South Africa are now open to all students. However, this national “choice” system does not provide meaningful access for multiple reasons (Ndimande, 2006; Woolman & Fleisch, 2006). For one, provincial heads of

departments can determine school feeder zones. Where these exist, learners who live within a zone are first in line for admission, and those whose parents work in the area are second in line (Department of Education, 1998). The best schools—which, in terms of resources and achievement, are still the former Model C (White) schools in cities—rarely have additional openings. Secondly, the cost of transport to a chosen school is often prohibitive for learners in townships. From rural areas, the sheer distances make these schools inaccessible. Consequently, Black learners have started to integrate some of the former White, colored, and Indian schools, but this has been a one-way street, with virtually no movement in the other direction—i.e., White students enrolling in Black schools (Soudien, 2004.)

The school funding scheme also remains problematic (Veriava, 2007). Provincial subsidies often come late in the school year, so some “no-fee” schools still charge fees. Several teachers at “no-fee” schools said their SGBs charge fees, then offer to reimburse parents when the government funds arrive, but hope the parents decline the offer. The state subsidies often are inadequate in any case, so principals and SGBs must undertake a host of donation-solicitation and fund-raising activities, including sending learners out to collect discarded cans. At many of the poorer fee-charging schools, a large number of parents do not pay the fees. Although schools legally must provide exemptions for eligible families, many SGBs and principals feel their schools cannot afford to enroll learners whose families cannot pay.

On June 1, 2007, about a million South African educators joined a month-long public service strike. This was the largest and longest teachers’ strike in the nation’s history since democracy. Although many of the White educators struck for only a day or not at all, all five of the teachers unions joined the strike to protest teachers’ pay. Bloch (2008) offered this perspective:

Teachers may not starve like some low-paid Congress of South African Trade Unions members. Yet they are a middle-class grouping unable to afford the basic aspirations due any professional elite—a car, house, a holiday, an occasional meal in a restaurant. Such comparisons have deepened teachers’ anger.

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### **A Note on Beliefs and Approach**

A collection of ideas and beliefs about social justice and injustice guides our work. From Rawls (1971/1999) we take the notion of justice as fairness, with the understanding that social inequalities, although perhaps inevitable, nevertheless should benefit the least advantaged members of society. This includes educational inequalities.

Secondly, we believe any understanding of justice must begin with recognition of the reality of injustice and further with injustice as experienced (Lebacqz, 1987). From liberation theology we borrow the notion of a “preferential option for the poor.” This orientation, a foundation of prophetic Christianity, makes the poor “the litmus test for justice” (Lebacqz, 1986)—not to the exclusion of all others and not because they are somehow “better,” but rather because “in [God’s] eyes

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‘the last are first’” (Gutierrez, 1988, p. xxviii). We recognize an “epistemological privilege” of the oppressed (Niebuhr, 1960, p. 80)—that is, the belief not that the poor and other oppressed peoples are always right, but rather that their perspectives warrant special attention.

Although we do not write as theologians, our sadness and outrage about the resource-based disparities to which the educators we interviewed bear witness derives in part from this orientation. It is poor learners and educators teaching in poor communities in townships and rural villages who are suffering most, and these learners and communities are almost entirely Black. In South Africa, even more than in the U.S., the race-poverty nexus continues to shape every aspect of social life. We view this “witness” as a central component of educational criticism (Books, 1994). Along these lines, we take to heart the need to consider “what can be learned from the material facts and ideological points of view of youth in countries, societies, and communities apart from our own” (Hull, Zacher, & Hibbert, 2009, p. 118), and add to this the need to listen and learn also from their teachers.

The 29 educators we interviewed were working in seven of South Africa’s nine provinces: Gauteng, Mpumalanga, Limpopo, North West, KwaZulu-Natal, the Eastern Cape, and the Western Cape. The interviews were largely opportunistic. Many took place at the University of Pretoria with teachers who brought their classes to a science center on the campus, who were affiliated with the center through an NGO, or who were taking classes there. Interviewees included teachers at an Afrikaans school in Pretoria; a mother and daughter, both teachers, who heard about our research and wanted to participate; and teachers we met while visiting schools in Gauteng, Mpumalanga, Limpopo, and the Western Cape for other purposes.

Fifteen of the teachers are Black, 13 are White, and one is Indian. All the Black teachers were working in all-Black schools. Ten of the White teachers were working in a well-resourced Afrikaans-medium school in Pretoria. One White teacher was teaching in Finland, but previously taught in an urban school with mid-level of resources and in an elite boys’ school, both in Pretoria, one was a special-education teacher in a small city school, and a third was working in a very small independent school in Pretoria. The Indian teacher was in a racially-mixed secondary school in Cape Town. The schools included rural and farm schools, township schools, and urban schools, some very poor and others with, as one educator put it, “all the resources in the world.” Among the questions asked were these:

- What are your primary aims as a teacher? What do you hope your students learn?
- Are you satisfied with your teaching? What would you change about your teaching if you could?
- How do you feel about the state of education in South Africa today?

We did not set out to explore black/white differences in teachers’ aims and concerns. However, differences both in the fundamental aims and in the basic work-

ing conditions of the Black and White teachers became apparent early on, so we subsequently analyzed the comments from this perspective. With this background, let us turn to the teachers.

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### **South African Teachers' Aims as Educators**

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#### **Aims: Moral Development and Vocational Preparation**

All but one of the White teachers said his or her primary aim as an educator is moral development, cultivating a love of learning and enjoyment of school, or developing students' individual potential. For example, the independent school teacher said he wants "to bring out [students'] humanness" and hopes his students will "have fond memories of school."<sup>3</sup> "I want kids to be true to themselves, stimulated to their maximum capacity," he added and explained: "Not all kids are equal. Those who are 'more than equal' should be able to do more. Those who are 'less than equal' should be able to do as much as they can." A teacher of Afrikaans at the Afrikaans school said she wants her students "to become full human beings—with everything, their whole being. I want to give them morals. There's where my satisfaction comes from." When asked what she meant by "morals," she elaborated: "Dedication, work ethic, how to cope as a human being, honesty—all the things you do for yourself." An economics teacher at the Afrikaans school hopes her students "learn skills, social skills—how to behave, how to react in a situation—as well as the subject," and added, "I want to work with happy children."

Asked about their aims, almost all the Black educators stressed not these humanistic ideals, but rather the need for learners to gain practical skills and credentials that will prepare them for a career. For example, a secondary teacher in a township in the North West province said she wants "to see [students] using what they learned in class, and taking careers that will benefit them in life, like engineering." This, she believes, this will "give them a life after school." "I hope my students learn not only the subject," a secondary math/science teacher in west Pretoria said. "I also encourage them in life, to find a career, especially one that will fill the gaps in our country—math, science, technology." A technology teacher at a rural secondary school in Mpumalanga shared her sadness about the psychological damage her students have suffered:

I just want [my students] to be better learners—compared to those students in [predominantly White] urban schools. The learners there are more progressive. I want [my students] to be like those learners. These learners have too little self-esteem because of the lack of resources and exposure. I would like them to match with the other learners and have self-confidence and knowledge—concrete knowledge that will stay with them forever. I will be happy if one of my students can go abroad and come back and tell the others and motivate them about how nice it is to be learned. In my area, there are many dropouts because they have never seen one going higher. . . . It's like planting something that doesn't grow.

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This teacher went on to say that she is considering leaving the teaching profession, perhaps to work with HIV and AIDS patients, because “then I’ll know I’m helping. . . . I’m afraid I’ll grow old and not see the fruits of my teaching.”

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### Concerns: Pay, Discipline, and Opportunity

Asked what they would change about their teaching if they could, almost all the teachers responded with concerns not about their teaching per se, but rather about either their working conditions or their students. “Salaries are a problem,” a White social science teacher at the Afrikaans school said. “Luckily, my wife is in a good profession. There are not a lot of men in teaching because of the money.” “There is such a migration of the good teachers from government to private schools or even to other countries,” the White South African teaching in Finland said. “I can totally understand their motivation, as government does not pay and the working conditions are harder now than ever.” A Black math/science educator in Pretoria challenged descriptions of teaching as a “calling,” which he believes is used to rationalize low pay:

The education system should refrain from saying teaching is a “calling.” It’s not a calling; it’s a profession. That leads them to underpaying teachers. The future of children is in our hands; teaching should be viewed from that point. As a calling, only those who can’t do anything else teach. . . . If they want serious people, they should stop calling it a ‘calling.’ I’m identified as someone teaching scarce skills. But I would leave overnight if I could find a better paying job.

Many of the teachers, but especially the White teachers, also complained about student behavior. A White social science teacher at the Afrikaans school described herself as “from the old school” and explained:

I like discipline. Teaching now, kids just let go. The time I spend repeating myself—if I could cut that in half. . . . There is no respect anymore. Kids in South Africa—there’s a sense of “I don’t care.” They don’t greet you, “Good morning, Mam, or Good morning, Sir.” In my time, it was, “Yes, Mam, no Mam.”

This teacher’s colleague agreed: “I’d like to go back to the old way—with the cane! I’m one of the old-schoolers. Discipline is a part of life. Kids today are struggling. I’d like to go back to the old South African method.” This comment refers to a provision of the *Schools Act* of 1996 that bans corporal punishment in schools.

Many educators also expressed concern about lack of opportunity. For example, the White independent school teacher said, “I worry about the clever kids and the not-so-clever kids. For the strong learners, I worry that they will not get the opportunities they need to excel, for a variety of reasons. For the weak ones, I worry that they won’t get the opportunities to be all they can be—that there won’t be opportunities.”

The Black teachers also spoke about lack of opportunity, but unlike their White colleagues, described it as the daily context of their work, and emphasized the insidious connection between poverty, perceptions of opportunity, and hope. A



secondary school teacher in a Durban township, for example, offered this explanation of the high dropout rate among black students:

When they do not see anyone older than them (benefiting from school), learners leave school, go and look for work, and do cheap labour. The girls like quick and fast money. So they fall in love with an older man and get money for cell phones and hair styles. It's a short life span: while they still have their face and look beautiful.

A biology teacher who had been working in rural Mpumalanga for six years spoke with dismay about students in one of her Grade 11 classes—"for slow learners"—who see no future in school. "Some of the learners have been in the class since the year I came, and every year their performance is going down," she said. "They are tired and frustrated. And now they are older. They don't have the money to go to technical colleges." An educator/principal at a primary school in Limpopo—who, like most principals in rural areas, also teaches—was trying to extend the school by two grades because there is no secondary school in the village. To continue past Grade 6, learners must walk to another village, which is an hour away with no connecting road. This trek puts young people at risk of rape, robbery, and attack by buffalo, lions, and other animals that sometimes escape from nearby Kruger Park when poachers break the fence. "The secondary-age learners get tired of going" so far, this educator/principal said, "so they stay home, have children, and collect the social grant. It is painful."

Almost every Black teacher spoke about the lack of social and emotional as well as financial resources in their schools, and about communities wracked by chronic and widespread unemployment, poverty, and illness. This secondary school teacher in rural Mpumalanga voiced the concerns of many of her colleagues:

There are so many things we don't have. There's not an administrative block for the principal. The principal's office is in a converted classroom. Another classroom is the staff room for teachers. We have pit toilets. The first ones were made of corrugated iron. Now there's one with bricks, but it's not flushing. They call it the "VIP toilet." Libraries, science and art centers—those things we don't have. The nearest library is 15 kilometers away, and you have to use a taxi to get there. . . . Learners must be able to see things. . . . They must see things like computers.

"In the rural areas, the toilets—you don't want to use them!" a teacher in a Durban township exclaimed. "The teachers leave at 3 o'clock to go home to use the toilet. Water, electricity—in the rural areas, 80% of the schools don't have these things."<sup>4</sup>

"My school has no money and no bank account," an educator/principal of a rural school in Limpopo said. This principal—who, like most principals in rural areas, also teaches—described his work as akin to "driving a Titanic ship . . . in the sea (where) everybody knows the danger they are facing." Half of a converted classroom at the school triples as his office, a "sick room" for students, and a staff meeting room. Other major challenges he faces include "child-headed households"

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(due to parent deaths from HIV and AIDS) and “starvation.”<sup>5</sup> A teacher in a semi-urban school near Pretoria estimated that 40% of the learners at her school are orphans. A teacher in Mpumalanga told this story:

I was teaching in Grade 3. . . . We were using that policy of not giving a child a report [at the end of the year] because he didn't pay [school fees]. . . . One day, somebody said, “There is a visitor at your door, crying.” I said, “Let the visitor in so that I can know exactly what has happened”. . . . This boy said, “Mam, please give me a report. Do you know what? Since I have started school I have not had a report. Because my parents cannot pay school fees. . . . I am the only one who is attending school. My brothers and sisters they go to the rubbish dump. They stay there to pick up some food to bring home; to pick up something that they can eat. We went with my mother. I said to them, ‘No, I want to go to school.’ That’s why I’m here, but I’ve never received a report. They will laugh at me because I am the only one in the family who attended school and I have never got a report.”<sup>6</sup>

In sum, although few of the teachers are happy with their pay and most said they wish young people behaved differently, the Black and White teachers otherwise have very different professional concerns. Whereas the White teachers on the whole stressed behavioral problems, the Black teachers cited poverty, illness, and a stunning lack of school resources as conditions that make their work almost impossible.

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### “Two Worlds” of Education

Asked how they feel about the state of education in South Africa today, many of the White teachers spoke about continuing inequities: “There are two worlds, especially in Pretoria: some of the best schools in the country, and even the world, but the worst too,” a White social science teacher said. “For the masses, education is in a terrible state. . . . In general, we have a long way to go to get rid of the apartheid system.” An economics teacher at the same school described the divide as a reality no one wants to address:

We don't want to talk about Black and White schools, but it's still that way. Schools in cities—there's no problem. The problems are in the rural and small town areas, due to teachers' education and the attitude of some teachers. They don't want to work after hours. . . . In rural areas, there are 50 or 60 students in a class, and they are taught under a tree. The circumstances are not what they should be.

Although several of the White teachers acknowledged “two worlds” of education, only one spoke about this as a problem for the privileged. As this teacher sees it, her students are growing up in a sheltered world:

This school is a bubble. I'm a cluster leader for 25 schools with Afrikaans teachers and they talk about the conditions of their schools—45 in a class, the kids are hungry, there's no books, no money. . . . I think the government is trying its best because what went on in education is shocking. We were children; we didn't know. . . . We are doing our utter best to help them—with worksheets and other things. I would like to propose that all privileged schools should have a buddy school—a Black school. They could help us learn about their culture and we could help them

with things. I feel there is a need to mix children. There are 4 or 5 Black kids in this school. The children are not growing up in reality. They are in a bubble too.

Other White teachers spoke not with shame but almost with nostalgia about the apartheid years when they believe things were better, at least for the White students. The independent school teacher, for example, expressed alarm about what he sees as the educational cost of transformation, a loss of excellence at the top:

Honestly, I would say the education system before the end of apartheid was better, but only for the 10% who were fortunate enough to be born white and privileged. Now we are striving to find a balance. The lower tier is rising up and the upper tier is coming down. . . . I'll do everything I can to prevent that, but it is coming down in many instances. I hope it will stop coming down and we can bring everyone up. . . . It's not fair if the system is structured [to disadvantage some], but in a free market economy, you get what you pay for.

With few exceptions, the White teachers blamed the ANC for problems in the school system and offered a general vote of no-confidence in its policies. For example, an English teacher at the Afrikaans school shared this complaint about Outcomes-Based Education (OBE), the philosophy behind the national curriculum adopted in 1998 and revised in 2002: "The pass rates have become so easy. A teacher needs more proof to say a child has failed. With the new OBE system, you are not supposed to focus on fundamentals, but children still need fundamentals. . . . OBE was implemented because of apartheid. It's seen as a way to meet at a point." The South African teaching in Finland views the government's response to the teachers' strike as evidence of misplaced priorities:

Possibly the government is a little short sighted in the whole education area. For example, when I was home . . . over July/August this year, there was the teachers' strike for over a month. Valuable time was lost, yet a pathetic increase was negotiated. A few weeks later the petrol tank drivers went on strike and I am not even sure the strike lasted more than a week. They were granted a salary increase. To me the subtle message there is: we need petrol, but education can just carry on as it is.

Some of the Black teachers also spoke about "two worlds" of education, but again, in a much more concrete and personal way: "We are in a different world" rather than "There are two worlds." Consider, for example, the perspective of an educator/principal of a rural primary school in Mpumalanga:

It's as if we are in a different world. We don't mix with the Whites, only Blacks. We don't feel the change. We now have democracy, but we're still in the same schools. We still have the same families, the same parents who are still poor. . . . Transformation is not an easy thing. There is good and bad to it. (The good?) The good is that parental involvement is very high. . . . Now, parents know what is happening in the schools. (And the bad?) The inequalities still exist and laws have been introduced haphazardly.

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Many of the Black teachers shared their White colleagues' concerns about OBE, but tended to attribute problems to implementation difficulties and to the challenge of providing professional development for under-prepared teachers. For example, a mathematics/science teacher in a Durban township offered this assessment: "In the curriculum, they are improving. The only thing is that they've introduced lovely topics but are leaving behind teachers." A math/science teacher in a township in the North West province also attributed problems to start-up difficulties:

Right now, I can't say we're on the right track. We're still finding our way. But with the proper system we'll come around. . . . The new system is in place. I don't have a problem with it. But teachers were in the old system. There's been a transformation, but then let them be work-shopped. The [education] policies were made with no guidance. . . . The teachers don't know how to make changes.

Overall, the White teachers we interviewed said they believe transformation of the education system was and is necessary. However, they have little confidence in the current government as well as some regret about what they regard as the high price of the transformation (lower quality, at least for the "top tier"), and see their role in the transformation as fundamentally one of sharing expertise. The teacher of Afrikaans, for example, mentioned her efforts to share teaching materials and suggested a buddy system for schools—to "help us learn about their culture and we could help them with things." In contrast, recall the Black technology teacher who wishes for learners like "the other learners"—those in schools where she imagines the students are more confident and knowledgeable. This teacher longs for students unburdened by poverty and lack of opportunity, students who instead are buoyed by the security of believing their material needs will be met and their futures will be bright. Whereas the White teacher is happy to share her teaching expertise and welcomes an opportunity to learn about other cultures, the Black teacher yearns not for guidance or friendship, but rather for a chance to work within the same sphere of privilege, which she believes would significantly alter what she is able to accomplish as a teacher and what or who her students are able to become. The Black teachers overall were both much more willing than their White colleagues to give the current government the benefit of the doubt and much more frustrated by the halting pace of change.

A larger sample of educators could complicate these general observations. Clearly, neither all White educators nor all Black educators think alike. Not all Black schools are hampered by resource shortfalls and not all White or predominantly White schools are thriving. Still, overall and in general, a sharp divide was quite apparent to us.

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### Why the "Two Worlds?"

Jansen (2006) poses sharply the question that we believe many of the Black teachers struggled to articulate:

Why is it that South Africa, with a Black majority government and population, with all the international goodwill in the world, with a reasonably stable and progressive economy, with a highly regarded policy infrastructure, and with what is frequently lauded as one of the most progressive constitutions in the world—seems to be heading, according to research and experience, in the same direction, viz., that despite 10 years in intense policymaking and planning, White schools remain markedly privileged and protected while Black schools, urban and rural, remain marginalized in both resources and performance? (p. 217)

Jansen's answer is in part that policymakers have been constrained in multiple ways. For one, although the education pie has been re-sliced to some extent post-apartheid, it has not been significantly enlarged. Also, the political environment, at least in the first few years of democracy, "militated against any radical or redistributive thrust in policymaking" (Jansen, 2002, p. 209). Because the newly democratic South Africa is a product not of a coup, but rather of a "negotiated settlement," structures of privilege were not eradicated. Rather, "policies of early transition consciously attempted to reconcile white and middle class elements of post-apartheid society with government reform" (Jansen, 2002, p. 209). Retention of a fee-based structure of funding public schools would be an example.

Unable or unwilling to alter the school environment for the poor significantly, the new government relied on "political symbolism" to mark the shift from apartheid to post-apartheid society. High ideals—such as access, equity, and redress—were written into policies that arguably never stood a chance of being realized, at least not in the short term. Consequently, "at the system-wide level, education remains steeped in crisis and inequality despite the flurry of policy" after 1994 (Jansen, 2002, p. 213). For teachers who took the rhetoric at face value but now experience little change in their day-to-day lives as educators, the frustration seemingly is becoming unbearable.

Although we asked only two of the teachers whether they intended to stay in the profession, several volunteered this information. One White teacher said her husband had been transferred to another province where she might look for social work. However, three of the Black teachers had already left public school teaching when we interviewed them; two were working for an NGO, albeit in an educational capacity, and one had joined a university education faculty. Another Black teacher said she plans to work only until the age of 40 "and then I think I'm supposed to do something else, because it's so stressful—the number of students in a class, teaching the same learners over and over, and all the paperwork. It's very stressful." As noted earlier, a Black math/science teacher claimed he would quit immediately if he could find a better paying job. "We've got nowhere to go! We're used to staying where we are not happy," the Black teachers interviewed together said when asked directly about their plans. Most troubling of all were the comments of the Black technology educator who is considering leaving the profession, despite her "passion for teaching," for what she believes would be more the more rewarding work of caring for HIV and AIDS patients—because she fears growing old without seeing

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the fruits of her teaching. We hear in this existential cry a lack of faith not in her students, but rather in their future opportunities, and perhaps in her own ability to continue to engender hope when so much outside her control snuffs it out.

The teachers' hopes and fears provide a window into the stresses and strains in South Africa, a nation on which the world has gazed with expectation, admiration, and sometimes horror. Their descriptions of their aims and concerns reflect some of the most significant challenges South Africa is facing as it struggles to develop as a democracy: a multi-tiered school system in which the "best" schools are the former White schools and the most stressed are the still all-Black schools in rural areas and townships; an educational bureaucracy that is unable or unwilling to implement reforms that provide significant redress; and beyond the educational arena, a broader public that is not demanding such reforms, at least not very forcefully.

The grand project of transformation continues as South Africa struggles to heal its wounds and move forward in a spirit of reconciliation and respect. Yet it seems that too much of this enormous task has been placed (or dumped) on teachers' shoulders. The stakes are high because teachers themselves must be able to envision a future of hope for their students and take pride in their work. To realize its constitutional ideals South Africa needs a committed, hopeful teaching force (Bloch, 2008), yet many teachers, especially Black teachers in rural and township schools, seemingly are struggling to maintain hope in a divided nation where two worlds of educational opportunity mirror and sustain two worlds of social and economic opportunity outside that system (van der Berg, 2007).

The disparity of income between rich and poor in South Africa now ranks as one of the widest in the world (U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 2007). Despite the emergence of a Black middle class and Black elite—"the black diamonds"—the life chances of most young people in South Africa today remain constrained by segregation (*de facto*, if no longer *de jure*), deep poverty, the social tragedy of AIDS orphans and child-headed families, and the legacy of apartheid, including stark educational inequalities that cry out for broad redress. The children pay the biggest price for this divide—those educated in "a bubble" and especially those relegated to rubbish dumps during the school day. However, teachers are suffering too, especially those left to cope as best they can with the legacy of apartheid policies and the shortcomings of post-apartheid policies as well.

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### What the U.S. Should Learn from South Africa

The educators we interviewed expressed markedly different aims and objectives that align closely with school resources. The (White) educators teaching in well resourced schools said they hope primarily to cultivate well-rounded students with strong moral cores. They worry most not about how their students will fare in the job market, but rather about how national reforms intended to widen educational opportunity are affecting educational standards. In contrast, the (Black) educators teaching in poorly resourced schools said they hope their students will gain skills to fill jobs in the nationally prioritized fields of science and technology, but fear

that few employment opportunities will be open to them. These educators' greatest frustrations center on the resource-based inequities they believe continue to constrain what they, and consequently their students, are able to accomplish. Keenly aware of high unemployment rates among Blacks and of what a life of poverty entails, the Black educators seemingly have high aspirations for their students, but low expectations.

Just 15 years after the fall of the apartheid state, it is not surprising that educators in rural and township schools that are still poorly resourced and still all-Black speak differently about their hopes and fears than their colleagues in much better resourced urban schools. Educational objectives are always shaped by teachers' social and political commitments, which in turn are shaped by their social situations (Delpit, 1988). Nevertheless, the diversity of purpose among South African educators is significant. The Black South African teachers speak passionately to the deep injustices that shape their aims as educators, and in so doing provide lessons about education and social justice that transcend the particularities of their own time and place. One such lesson would be that *common educational aims require shared experiences and a shared faith in the realistic possibilities that lie ahead for young people*. The alternative is an education profession divided within a fractured society—a reality U.S. teachers share with their South African colleagues.

Some might argue that in light of conditions in South Africa, teachers in the U.S., even those in the most poorly funded schools, should have no complaints. That is not our view, however. Social justice, like poverty, ought to be defined in relative and not absolute terms. Although all U.S. public schools have such basic infrastructure as water, electricity, and flush toilets, a system of funding that relies largely on state allocations and local property taxes produces large gaps in per-pupil spending among the 50 states, among school districts within states, and even among buildings within single districts (Liu, 2006; Roza, 2006). Year after year, schools in property-rich districts have been able to hire more experienced teachers, to offer more advanced courses, and to provide more instructional resources as well as extracurricular activities than schools in property-poor districts (Clotfelter, Ladd, Vigdor, & Wheeler, 2006; Kozol, 1991, 2005; Rebell & Wolff, 2008).

Educators in many nations, including South Africa and the U.S., seemingly have been saddled with collective hopes for social reform, often institutionalized in broad school accountability agendas (Rebell & Wolff, 2008). Jansen's (2002, 2006) concept of "political symbolism" sheds light on this process, especially in the U.S. where the federal NCLB legislation not only is leaving many children behind, but in some ways seems perversely designed to do so (Ryan, 2004). The rousing cry in the U.S. to leave "no child behind" has been underfunded (Dillon, 2008). Stunning variations in state standards have been tolerated, and the U.S. Department of Education only now is cracking down on some of the "creative accounting" that has allowed many schools to hide dismaying dropout and pushout rates—the result all too often of efforts to shed students unlikely to boost test scores (Wald & Losen, 2007).

Unlike South Africa, the U.S. does not have a national curriculum. Nevertheless,

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through NCLB, teachers have been handed a national objective—namely, to close the academic achievement gap created by longstanding test-score differentials among student “subgroups”: White, Black, and Latino; middle class and poor; native English speakers and English language learners; and students with and without learning disabilities. However, just as two worlds within the South African school system reflect two worlds outside the schools, so too do “savage inequalities” in public schooling in the U.S. (Kozol, 1991, 1995, 2000, 2005) reflect the “two Americas” John Edwards critiqued throughout his bid for the 2008 Democratic presidential nomination. Where such social and educational divides exist, the South African teachers’ comments suggest, we can expect philosophical divides among teachers as well. In ignoring this schism, we preclude potentially constructive dialog about pedagogy, curriculum, the broad aims and purposes of education, and the meaning of social justice.

As U.S. educational reformer George Counts (1934) argued 75 years ago,

No inquiry into American society, profound and comprehensive though it may be, can remove from [the educator’s] shoulders the responsibility of embodying in his theories and programs some interpretation of history in the making, some general outlook upon the world, some frame of reference with respect to society, some conception of things deemed necessary, of things deemed possible, of things deemed desirable in the proximate future. (p. 3)

In the U.S., as elsewhere, teachers’ aims reflect their conceptions of “the possible” and “the desirable.” In a context of social inequality where poor students and many students of color are not part of the dominant “culture of power,” these conceptions necessarily will vary, and these varied conceptions necessarily will affect how teachers attempt to meet their students’ needs (Delpit, 1988). In a society still stratified by race, certainly by class, and increasingly by native language (Orfield & Lee, 2006)—a society in which an increasing number of children and youth are being left behind in the current economic recession as family members lose jobs, homes, health insurance, and pensions—those needs are no more likely now than ever to be perceived as common.

In sum, although the contexts of educational reform in South Africa and the U.S. differ markedly, the South African educators’ descriptions of their hopes, fears, and objectives highlight a general relationship between educational inequities and teachers’ aims that has important policy implications, especially in the U.S. where the NCLB legislation is shaping schooling so significantly. Prodded by the sanctions as well as the equity ideals embedded in NCLB, U.S. schools are attempting to close long-standing achievement gaps, albeit without first closing even longer standing “opportunity gaps” (Rebell & Wolff, 2008). Beyond material inequities, extensive research documents a “hidden curriculum” in U.S. public schools that, year after year, prepares some students for professional jobs and leadership positions in society and others for low-level, low-pay service work, if even that (see Anyon, 1990, among many others). Drill-based teaching to the test, fueled by the NCLB requirement that all students meet state standards of proficiency by 2014,



is much more prevalent in schools in poor communities than in schools in more affluent neighborhoods (Eaton, 2009; Kozol, 1991, 1995, 2000, 2005).

The injustices in South Africa clearly have taken a toll not only on learners' aspirations and senses of possibility, but also on the morale of many of their teachers: "It's like planting something that doesn't grow." As in South Africa, so too in the U.S., a social-justice agenda for educational reform requires not only a fairer distribution of resources, but also a more broadly shared sense of efficacy and hope among teachers (Ball, 2006). Significantly reducing achievement gaps in the U.S. will require, at the very least, uniting teachers behind this objective and ensuring that teachers believe not only that achievement gaps *should* be closed, but also that they (teachers) *can*, individually and collectively, improve educational outcomes for poor students and students of color (Evans, 2009).

With this in mind, we believe educational reformers and policymakers can and should learn at least two lessons about education and social justice from South African educators: (1) that uniting teachers behind a national objective, such as closing achievement gaps, requires simultaneously reducing long-standing inequities in social and educational opportunities for students as well as in basic working conditions for teachers; and (2) that the intimate link between national objectives and teachers' own hopes and fears requires that policymakers seek out and listen far more carefully than most do to the views of teachers in poor communities of color about what children in these communities most need to learn. In the much-quoted words of Jane Addams (1902/2002), "We have learned to say that the good must be extended to all of society before it can be held secure by one person or one class; but we have not yet learned to add the statement that unless all men [sic] and classes contribute to that good, we cannot even be sure that it is worth having" (p. 97).

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The teacher interviews are part of a larger comparative project conceptualized by Sue's colleague Laura Dull.

<sup>2</sup> As part of the post-apartheid transformation, the Department of Education suggested new language: "educators" and "learners" rather than teachers and students. The terms are used synonymously throughout this article.

<sup>3</sup> Because we promised anonymity, neither individuals nor schools are identified by name.

<sup>4</sup> Although this estimate is high, the Department of Education's 2007 infrastructure report confirms serious problems in KwaZulu-Natal, the province (not one of the poorest) in which Durban is located: More than 11% of the schools had no water in 2006, and more than 38% depended on boreholes or rainwater harvesting systems. Almost 28% of the schools had no electricity, and almost 73% had no flush toilets.

<sup>5</sup> One in every eight children in South Africa is now an orphan as a result of HIV and AIDS (Department of Social Development, 2005).

<sup>6</sup> End-of-year school reports often are withheld from learners whose families cannot or do not pay school fees (Veriava, 2007).

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