

Let's transform our schools, first.

I have written previously that the UCT debate about transformation has a distinctly middle class – even elitist – bias. Very few of the participants have spoken, for example, about the state of schooling in our country and the impact it will continue to have on attempts to produce the next generation of black academics. Those who have, tend to be ignored or shouted down, not infrequently for being white. Instead of acknowledging the critical importance of primary and secondary education for the transformation of tertiary institutions, some believe that 'Afrocentrism' and the thorough 'decolonisation' of the curriculum will do the trick. More about that, later.

Alan Cliff presents alarming statistics about the state of education in South Africa. Of the 70 000 applicants to higher education institutions in 2014, the results of the National Benchmark Test indicate that only one-third "are ready to cope with the academic literacy demands they'll face in tertiary courses", while more than half will require additional academic support if they are to complete their studies successfully. Andre van Zyl – director of the Academic Development Centre at the University of Johannesburg – claims that more than half of the 18 percent of matriculants who are accepted into universities drop out in the first year of study, which, according to a 2013 report by the Council on Higher Education, is partly attributable to poor preparation at school level.

Yet these statistics say nothing about the millions of young South Africans who will never see the inside of a university. Wits academic, Lee Rusznyak, cites the fact that only 48 percent of learners who start Grade 1 will actually finish Grade 12, with most dropping out in Grades 10 and 11. And of the public school learners that completed the National Senior Certificate (NSC) in 2013, less than one-third obtained their NSC with a bachelor's pass that would enable them to pursue a university education. With the transformation debate restricted mostly to the functioning of tertiary institutions themselves, academics in general are yet to locate the quality of primary and secondary schooling at the centre of their

deliberations, those places of 'learning' where many of our young people, frankly, are running scared.

Our schooling system is a Manichean system that is divided into oak-lined classrooms for the children of the well to do – and broken classrooms for the children of the down and out, where many have to learn under threat of assault, rape or death. I shall say nothing of inferior diets, walking for hours to get to school, or getting caught in gang crossfire on the way home, never mind the supreme injustice – that for millions of children whose caregivers make the monumental effort to get them to school, they will not find jobs in this country anyway, in part because they are functionally illiterate and innumerate after more than a decade of formal instruction.

One need not belabour the point that the consequences of a poor schooling can be disastrous. Foremost among these is the near automatic relegation to the ranks of what is more appropriately termed the underclass. Distinct from the working class, the number of unemployed South Africans is outrageous.

According to the narrow definition, our country has an unemployment rate of about 26 percent. But according to the broad definition – which includes people who should be working but are too demoralized to look for work – the rate is closer to 40 percent. The youth unemployment rate is anywhere between 50 and 60 percent, making it among the highest in the world. Not even Greece's youth unemployment rate can top ours – and that country, from all the media coverage, looks to be teetering on the edge. Here, in South Africa, we've become so accustomed to the economic violence that is routinely visited on our people that it has lost its capacity to shock.

So what happens when young people have nothing to do? Well, they either atrophy at home or they involve themselves in antisocial activities, including substance abuse, gang involvement, and wanton acts of violence. Our country is failing its young people and yet Cyril Ramaphosa can claim in his 2013 defence of the National Development Plan that only investors – not the government – can create jobs. These, mind you, are the same investors who benefit from the kind of

financial deregulation that Ramaphosa supports and that, in the year 2012 alone, allowed them to take \$29 billion out of the country to avoid paying taxes. If he were alive today, Steve Biko may well have said that young people in South Africa are pretty much on their own.

What are socially conscious intellectuals to do? It should be clear that we need to extend the horizon of our discussions to include the majority of young South Africans who, because of the quality of their schooling, will never have the pleasure (though our students may differ) of listening to our lectures. To accomplish this, we cannot continue to avoid interrogating an apparently inviolable class interest that prevents us from siding with the economically oppressed, and that makes it difficult for us to distinguish between red herrings and substantive acts of transformation. On this last point, we have to be unambiguous about what we mean by an 'Afrocentric' curriculum. At the time that Thabo Mbeki was waxing lyrical about the African Renaissance, his brother, Moeletsi, was decrying it as "a triumphalist syndrome that afflicts newly liberated African countries." Ali Mazrui is another who has cautioned that the "champions of Afrocentricity", while "profoundly distrustful" of Westernization, "are often among the most Westernized themselves." And then there is Frantz Fanon, whose very rejection of Negritude provides further grounds for circumspection.

But before we can even begin such examinations, we have to get over ourselves and a penchant for ad hominem attacks that is not only the resort, frequently, of people who do not believe in the merits of their case but also makes us appear to fiddle while South Africa burns. We remain blinded by ideological loyalties that prevent us from engaging with each other seriously and respectfully, as though the luminaries of the past were so uncertain of their place in history that they stood in need of our unswerving allegiance. Fanon, Biko and the rest of the pantheon have already made their mark – but what shall we leave for the generations to come?

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