

IS DEMOCRACY STILL RELEVANT IN SOUTH AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION?

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ABSTRACT

At least, over the past four decades post-colonial African higher education has undergone significant changes in the quest to cultivate democratic educational / pedagogical actions in universities. From its early insistence on deliberative action (Waghid 2001), more recently, it assumed the forms of both ethical pursuits (Davids and Waghid 2016) and caring (Waghid 2019). Yet, as South Africa continues its unprecedented transition into a democracy, it is becoming abundantly evident that what is needed in higher education should surpass deliberative, ethical, and caring encounters. The expectation that a democratic climate would ease the deep inequalities in higher education, would somehow set the scene for a renewal of knowledge, and restore opportunities for historically marginalised communities, lies in limbo. Instead, what we witness is the awakening of renewed resistance – this time, not against an unjust apartheid regime, but against a democracy that seems incapable of yielding to its own ideals. In this article, therefore, we argue that for higher education to enact its democratic imperative – that is, its transformative ideals, necessary not only for its own public thriving, but for its citizenship – it ought to invoke the idea of resistance (Davids and Waghid 2021).

Keywords: democracy, higher education, resistance, citizenship, pedagogy

DIPPING INTO THE PAST

Deliberative action is always going to play a significant role in reconfiguring a distorted higher education agenda on the African continent. Apartheid not only oppressed and dehumanized any group, categorized as “non-white”, it also erased their autonomy, agency, and voice. Hence, inviting people or students into talking to, talking about, and talking with one another, should always be a necessary pursuit of what it means to seek and cultivate (higher) education in

(South) Africa, and elsewhere. When students engage in deliberative action, they learn to articulate their views and feelings, and by so doing, they invite others into the same action, thereby creating mutually respectful encounters or actions. Hence, Amy Gutmann and Denis Thompson's (2004, 3–4) assertion that, “[i]n deliberative democracy an important way these agents [students] take part is by presenting and responding to reasons, or by demanding that their representatives do so, with the aim of justifying laws under which they must live together. The reasons are meant both to produce a justifiable decision and to express the value of mutual respect.”

In this way, making bold claims about the importance of deliberative action for a changing higher education environment on the (South) African continent (Waghid 2001), secures an educative platform according to which people in higher education would have opportunities to do things together and to chart out their paths towards emancipatory discourses, and importantly, re-humanisation. Consequently, several policies, conceptual, structural, and institutional changes occurred in the higher education sector to the extent that most of the developments centered around the importance of the democratic experience in building more equitable, just, and transformative higher education scenarios. In *White Paper 3* (DoE 1997: 1.19), for example, we find the following:

“The principle of democratisation requires that governance of the system of higher education and of individual institutions should be democratic, representative and participatory and characterised by mutual respect, tolerance and the maintenance of a well-ordered and peaceful community life. Structures and procedures should ensure that those affected by decisions have a say in making them, either directly or through elected representatives. It requires that decision-making processes at the systemic, institutional and departmental levels are transparent, and that those taking and implementing decisions are accountable for the manner in which they perform their duties and use resources.”

Following *White Paper 3* (DoE 1997) was the *Higher Education Amendment Act* (DoE 1998), and the *National Plan for Higher Education* (DoE 2001), respectively. Informing these education policy initiatives has been a committed drive to differentiate post-apartheid higher education from its widely disparate past, while simultaneously and trying to satisfy utilitarian demands in the service of the government and the public. Consequently, one finds that the *National Plan for Higher Education* (DoE 2001) proposes the achievement of 16 outcomes which range from increasing student access, particularly of black communities into the university sector, to enhancing their (students') cognitive abilities with respect to technical and professional competences that would not only ensure greater competitiveness in an ever-evolving labour market economy but also increased participation as democratic citizens in

service of the “public good”. It is against this background that South African higher education took a significant deliberative turn as was evident from the myriad policy changes.

TRANSFORMATION AS DEMOCRATISATION?

Despite, the transformative changes observed within and beyond the higher education sector in South Africa, it has become evident that policy reform alone is insufficient to realise the renewal and restoration required by a society, so steeped in inequality. It became clear that democratic departures, encased in transformative discourses are not enough to reach the lived experiences of students, as they enter higher education spaces. On the one hand, is the inter-related dilemma of historically under-developed (“black”) universities trying to meet the intense demands of a rapidly increasing student population. In this way higher education transformation became more acutely concerned about the enactment of justice within the sector so that no individual or group was excluded, marginalised, and prejudiced. The quest for ethical engagement overtook the imperatives of deliberative democratic discourse. But the issues are not only about granting access to historically excluded groups of students, or providing infrastructural support, such as merging existing or building new campuses. There are deeper complexities attached to what happens beyond external access. Specifically, how to support historically marginalised (especially those from rural settings) students in spaces, from which they have been excluded generationally. In a context of an equally disparate and poor schooling system, which continues to service most “black” learners’, the burdens on higher education are profound, and often viewed as not the problem of universities.

On the other hand, universities have cultures. For students to succeed in shifting from external access to internal participation, they must know how to navigate these cultures. Read, Archer, and Leathwood (2003) maintain that even though the dominant discourses of knowledge, communication and practice in higher education can be seen to vary significantly geographically, politically, socially, and economically, as well as between institutions, between faculties, and between disciplines, it is nevertheless, defined by particular discourses, which constitute academic and institutional cultures. Failure to meet the demands of institutional cultures – as is especially the case for “black” students at historically advantaged (“white”) universities – often leads to student estrangement (Mann 2001). When students are estranged, explains Mann (2001), they are unable to engage or contribute in ways which are meaningful and productive for the realisation of their own potential and learning requirements. Coupled with financial constraints, students struggle in maintaining the academic standards necessary for success, and ultimately either drop out, or complete their programmes over a delayed period.

The result is that contrary to policy expectation, increasing student enrolments, or

massification, has not yielded the democratisation. Instead, argues Badat (2020), an exclusive concentration on social equity and redress without adequate public funding and academic development initiatives to support under-prepared students has negative implications for quality, compromises the production of high-quality graduates with the requisite knowledge competencies and skills, and adversely affects economic development. The reality, according to Badat (2020), is a substantial improvement in opportunity and outcomes for black and especially working-class students are yet to be realised. Moreover, if access, opportunity and success were previously shaped by race, they are now largely conditioned by social class (Badat 2020).

BUT WE HAVE TO CARE ...

Often the cliché, that policy implementation is enhanced through enactment, had been loudly acclaimed, but as the Council on Higher Education's (2022) latest review on higher education change in the sector confirms, such change encountered many constraints whether in relation to funding, pedagogy, or just the persistence of inequality and exclusion in the higher education system. Why this had been the case, we attribute to a serious lack of caring in the system. It is not good enough just to offer a policy without being caringly considered about how the policy would be enacted. Certainly, there is ample evidence that intimate that we forgot to care, hence, the persistence of inequalities, inequities, and a lack of genuine democratic transformation on the continent. But unless we return to caring, as a key foundation to what makes us human, the hope of democratizing higher education in South Africa, will remain elusive. What, therefore, does it mean to care?

Tronto (2005) identifies four ethical dimensions of care: attentiveness, responsibility, competence, and responsiveness. Care ethics understands individuals to having varying degrees of dependence and interdependence on the other. In her role as an attentive, competent and responsible, and responsive teacher, she has to be able to discern between the assumed needs of the learner – often driven by the curriculum – and the expressed needs – which will only become apparent when the learner is listened to by the educator, that is, when the learner feels cared-for (Noddings 2006). To Noddings (2006), caring for the other is understood as a moral consequence of ethical behavior – that is, the “capacity to be moved by the affective condition of the other that educators try to develop in students as part of their moral education”.

Why is caring important, and why should it matter at all in higher education? As we have briefly shown thus far, despite a democratic climate and an array of policy reform measures, higher education, many students do not experience higher education as a transformative space. There are glaring schisms between what students need (their expressed needs) and what

universities can or are prepared to offer. There is therefore a disjuncture between institutional delivery and students' needs. Located both within and between institutions and students are academics or teachers. The role and responsibility of teachers surpasses that of imparting content knowledge and ensuring students' academic success; they can influence, motivate, inspire and challenge students to think (Waghid and Davids 2020). It is possible, asserts Noddings (2006), for caring to transcend one's individuality so that it is possible to imagine what others experience.

By engaging with students through deliberative action, teachers can listen to students, and begin to understand their challenges and difficulties. In this way, teachers can draw themselves into the worlds of their students and begin to make sense of their experiences. This kind of deliberative action, however, can only unfold if classrooms are cultivated into spaces for and of engagement – in which students are unafraid to bring their identities, and see their teacher not only as competent pedagogical authorities, but as attentive and responsive human beings. For this reason, Waghid (2019) and Waghid et al. (2020) maintains that it is possible to conceive of pedagogical encounters, informed by deliberative action, as acts of justice. For students to find their place in higher education, for them to feel that they belong, teachers have to respond by providing spaces for humane engagement. To care is to shift beyond a professional role, and into a responsive one towards another.

AND RESIST ...

Thus far, we have highlighted key barriers to student success at higher education. We have drawn attention to the desperate need for a knowledge of who students are through deliberative action, and to respond with an ethics of care, so that universities can become more humane spaces of engagement. Students, as we have also noted, are not passive participants in deliberative action or in caring encounters. By witnessing and experiencing care from teachers, or those who are perceivably in authority, they are socialized into what it means to being cared for, as well as being carers.

Students are acutely aware of the paradoxes encountered in higher education. They know, firsthand, what it means to apply to institutions with hope and pride, while carrying the dread of not knowing whether they will have funding. So too, they are well-versed in standing on the sidelines not only of their academic programmes, but in the social spaces of their universities. Student protests are a loud indicator of student discontent, but they are also a necessary sign of resistance. Foucault (1991, 75) explains that resistance to power is about “detaching the power of truth from the forms of hegemony, social, economic, and cultural, within which it operates at the present time”. In the case of students, it involves resistance to a democracy, which has

failed to see and recognize them; resistance to policies, which purportedly reveal cognisance and comprehension, but continue to fall short of its own principles. Quite correctly, therefore, students' citizenship in the university ought to be as reliant on student interest and participation, as on transformational and activist dimensions (Keet, Nel, and Sattarzadeh 2017). For students to realise their own rights and responsibilities, they have to insert themselves into legitimate spaces of resistance, as is found in student activism. The problem, however, is that not only do universities stumble in ensuring inclusive and caring spaces for students, but they also respond to student resistance with increasing measures of securitisation and suppression – shutting down the necessity of deliberative action, which is critical to any democracy.

For universities to fulfil their mandates as democratised spaces, they have to recognise that students are not mere recipients of knowledge and skills; they are autonomous agents, who bring their own perspectives and perceptions of the world into a university space (Davids 2021). Universities ought to be spaces where students are actively able and encouraged to engage in self-critique and critique of institutional practices. The more open universities are to resistance, the greater the discursive potential for grappling with questions, contestations and controversies (Davids 2021). Our argument for resistance in the higher education is a quest for rupturing whereby we should consider rethink and reimagine how change ought to manifest. It is through resistance to our own intelligent efforts that we can possibly conjure up ways to make the system remain in a condition of democratic change. After all, provoking people in the sector to articulate themselves, to listen to one another, and to talk back critically to one another are credible ways to ensure a just higher education system. But it is not enough. The pursuit of continuous transformation of South African higher education ought to remain an exercise of activism through which change can be about resisting the taken-for-granted and recognizing that democracy is only alive when it can be interrogated and resisted.

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