

BOOK REVIEWS

‘Germinating a seed and cultivating the dream’ *A Seed of a Dream: Morris Isaacson High School and the struggle for education in Soweto, 1956–2012*

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One of my favourite American poets, Langston Hughes (1907–1967), is often referenced on matters pertaining to Black South Africa’s struggles during apartheid. One of his lesser-referenced poems, ‘Dreams’ reads ‘Hold fast to dreams / For if dreams die / Life is a broken-winged bird / That cannot fly. / Hold fast to dreams / For when dreams go / Life is a barren field / Frozen with snow.’¹ As a significant member of the Harlem Renaissance,² Hughes continuously reflected on the condition of Black America and celebrated the struggles and achievements of Black people in the United States of America. Hughes’s social commentary resonated remarkably well with the experience of Black South Africans during apartheid

1 L. Hughes, ‘Dreams’, *The dream keeper and other poems (Illustrated by Brian Pinkney)*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007, p. 4.

2 According to the Library of Congress “Research Guides”, the “Harlem Renaissance was a period in American history from the 1920s and 1930s. During this time, many African-Americans migrated from the South to Northern cities, seeking economic and creative opportunities. Within their communities creative expression became an outlet for writers, musicians, artists, and photographers, with a particular concentration in Harlem, New York”. <https://guides.loc.gov/harlem-renaissance> Accessed: 2 July 2024.

and, some would contend, in the post-apartheid, free, and democratic dispensation as well.³ Notwithstanding the remarkable positive changes ushered in by the abolishment of apartheid and the opening up of opportunities for all in our country, many historically disadvantaged communities—a proxy for formerly Black communities—still linger in a disadvantage due to the legacy of apartheid, among other things. Contemporary reflections on the state of free and democratic South Africa continuously wrestle with this peculiar inheritance, its role in the present, as well as its implications for the future.

Consequently, as a result of the need to grapple with this legacy, contemporary South African history is swarming with biographies of individuals, institutions, communities, neighbourhoods, cities, and regions often intersecting with significant historical events and moments. Top-of-mind examples are places akin to Sharpeville and the 21 March 1960 Sharpeville massacre, and the 16 June 1976 Soweto student uprisings. Some of these spectacular moments in history have enjoyed significant attention through formal study and other treatments that foreground their significance locally and internationally.⁴ Analogously, much ink has been spent on Soweto and the iconic 16 June student uprising.⁵ Furthermore, in the post-apartheid context, 16 June has also been immortalised through the national public holiday, Youth Day. Similarly, the infamous Bantu Education system, implicated in the contestations leading to the student uprising, has also enjoyed its fair share of attention from scholars of education, education history, and politics, to name some of the obvious disciplines wrestling with this historical phenomenon. The amount of attention and effort expended on Soweto and 16 June 1976 could reasonably lead one to wonder why anyone would still attempt a further elucidation of this well-trodden subject.

The story of Morris Isaacson High School in Jabavu, Soweto, the school that took the

3 Sipiwo Mahala's 2021 play, "Bloke and his American Bantu" celebrates South African writer Bloke Modisane and Langston Hughes "simple friendship that led to international solidarity and cultural exchange between South Africa and Black America" in the 1960s. <https://arts.uj.ac.za/whats-on/bloke-and-his-american-bantu/> Accessed: 3 July 2024.

4 Select examples of these are: M. Sparg, *Guilty and Proud: An MK Soldier's Memoir of Exile, Prison and Freedom*, Jacana Media, 2024; N. Nieftagodien, *The Soweto uprising: A Jacana pocket history*, Jacana Media, 2014; T. Lodge, *Sharpeville: an apartheid massacre and its consequences*, Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 2011; S. Ndlovu, *The Soweto Uprisings: Counter Memories of June 16*, Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1998. P. Magubane and C. Smith, *Soweto: The fruits of fear*, Cape Town: Struik Publishers, 2002. J. Brown, *The Road to Soweto: Resistance and the Uprising on 16 June 1976*, Auckland Park: Jacana Media, 2004; P.L. Bonner and L. Segal, *Soweto: A History*, Johannesburg: Maskew Miller Longman, Pty, Ltd. 1998.

5 N. Nieftagodien, *The Soweto uprising: A Jacana pocket history*, Jacana Media, 2014; S. Ndlovu, *The Soweto Uprisings: Counter Memories of June 16*, Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1998. P. Magubane and C. Smith, *Soweto: Fruits of Fear*, Pretoria, Struik Publishers, 2002. J. Brown, *The Road to Soweto: Resistance and the Uprising on 16 June 1976*, Auckland Park: Jacana Media, 2004; P.L. Bonner and L. Segal, *Soweto: A History*, Johannesburg: Maskew Miller Longman, Pty, Ltd. 1998.

lead in the protest that commenced in Soweto on that fateful winter's day in June 1976 and soon spread throughout the country, eventually leading to the post-1994 dispensation, has not necessarily enjoyed the telling Wits University History Professor Clive Glaser's new biography of the township school brings to light in *A seed of a dream: Morris Isaacson High School and the struggle for education in Soweto, 1956-2012*. Glaser's most recent monograph was launched through his essay published in the *Sunday Times* on Sunday, 16 June 2024 as part of what would be the 48th annual commemoration of the student uprisings.⁶ In many ways, the book, which comes almost half a century after this historic moment, is a synthesis of the life history of this township school in Soweto from its inception in the 1950s up to 2012 and its location in the struggle against apartheid and Bantu Education. Furthermore, and in the best tradition of historical biography, *A seed of a dream* is simultaneously the story of a school, its community, its struggle with the deleterious machinations of Bantu Education, and the challenges of the promise of education in a liberated nation post-1994. It also tells how learners, their teachers, and the community managed to carve out a viable, meaningful, and creative space within a system designed to stifle their dreams and ambitions despite the further threat of derailment of their life trajectories presented by the allure of gangsterism and crime in their community. This they achieved by not turning their back on the proverbial 'half loaf' offered them by Bantu Education at the time, but instead focusing their energies, efforts, and resources on building an institution focused on academic success with great import and significance for its learners, ostensibly subverting the intentions of the architects of apartheid and their designs for black education in Soweto and the entire country.

As an institutional history of a township school in particular, *A seed of a dream* chronicles the history of Morris Isaacson High School, which commenced its existence from its humble roots in a small Salvation Army-run, missionary school called Fred Clarke in the 1950s in Klipspruit. Following the imposition of Bantu Education in 1953, the school was renamed Klipspruit Secondary School in the mid-1950s and relocated to Jabavu in 1957 as a Bantu Education controlled secondary school called Mohloding Secondary School. Given the lacklustre roll-out of secondary schools in townships under

6 C. Glaser, "What happened to the school at the centre of the June 16 uprising? While the 1976 uprising cemented Morris Isaacson High School's place in history, Prof Clive Glaser tackles two central questions: how did this school in Soweto flourish under Bantu Education, and why did it not reach its full potential in the democratic era?", *Sunday Times*, 16 June 2024. <https://www.timeslive.co.za/sunday-times/opinion-and-analysis/insight/2024-06-16-what-happened-to-the-school-at-the-centre-of-the-june-16-uprising/> Accessed: 2 July 2024.

Bantu Education, with the support of the Morris Isaacson Education Fund, Mohloding was upgraded to a fully-fledged senior secondary school in 1960 bearing the name of its benefactor, Morris Isaacson. *A seed of a dream* also critically engages these developments and maps the contours of the struggle against apartheid and Bantu Education led by the learners at the school in the centre of Soweto that spilled over to all corners of South Africa and the globe, which resulted in the ultimate demise of the apartheid regime commencing with the announcement on 6 July 1976 of its unceremonious withdrawal of its plans to impose Afrikaans as the medium of instruction in African schools to this racist, minority regime ultimately being replaced by a democratically elected government in 1994. More significantly, *A seed of a dream* also encapsulates the hopes and aspirations of generations of South Africans in the contemporary context of a post-apartheid dispensation with its new opportunities and challenges, failures, and broken dreams through the experience of this iconic education institution in the heart of Soweto, which has not flourished in the new dispensation as it ought to have or could have been expected to fare.

However, by asking the critical question of how we get to the current context through casting back a glance at the road Morris Isaacson High School traversed to the here and now, *A seed of a dream* registers the aspirations of a people through recognising their agency in the journey travelled to the current context and reflects some of the shortcomings and missteps in how we have engaged with transformation during the struggle against apartheid as well as in the post-liberation context. The critical observation from this exercise reveals that the government, regardless of whether it is driven by draconian or revolutionary fervour, is not going to save our schools and communities on its own. The apartheid government failed to successfully implement its policy of a diminished education experience for Black learners at Morris Isaacson High School while the new democratic government is failing to capitalise on the providence of history to raise Morris Isaacson High School as a stellar example of what can be achieved in township schools in a post-apartheid context. In the end, the story *A seed of a dream* tells indicates that the communities our schools are located in are critical, if not indispensable, to the success or failure of educational institutions and the experiences of learners in these schools. Consequently, the agency of the stakeholders in the education ecosystem in our communities is crucial, if not fundamental, to the success of our schools, and by extension, our communities and nation in general.

While material and financial resources, as well as cultural capital, play a significant role in the success of schools in any community, *A seed of a dream* foregrounds the agency of the community, the learners, teachers, and the school leadership through deliberate and continued efforts to build a culture of disciplined, directed and significant learning. At

Morris Isaacson High School, this proved to be an asset beyond the material resources supporting learning and education. Often it is not simply or merely a matter of the physical circumstances alone that makes for a successful education enterprise. Albeit an important part, such as building a fence around the school to protect both learners and assets or building a first-class science or computer laboratory, a school is more than the material manifestation of an institution. If there is anything to learn from chronicling the history of the schools in our communities, it is that often the right attitude, disposition, and commitment in and around the school are far more consequential than perfect conditions and circumstances in charting successful life trajectories for learners and their institutions.

Framed around eight chapters bounded by an introduction and conclusion, *A seed of a dream* covers the initial years of establishing Morris Isaacson and its growth due to urbanisation's increased demand for such institutions for the burgeoning Black population in tandem with the implementation of the legal gyrations of apartheid around urban areas. Due to the destruction of records as a result of two 'substantial fires' at Morris Isaacson in 1977 and 1991, *A seed of a dream* also celebrates the utility and indispensability of oral history as a source to fill the gaps resulting from a lack of documentary evidence on which to construct the history of the school, while taking demonstrable care to ensure rigour through cross-referencing and the triangulation of oral evidence.⁷ Notwithstanding these remarkable achievements, *A seed of a dream* is hampered by heavily relying on writing conventions such as acronyms to substitute MIHS for Morris Isaacson High School. While this is usually a useful convention in formal writing, in this instance it hampers reading as the reader spells out the full name when reading. Also, abbreviating Bantu Education to BE is not only unfamiliar, it is also disorienting, with the reader having to reconnect in their mind the uncommon and strange acronym. As used in the text, these conventions do not assist the otherwise good readable story *A seed of a dream* narrates. There is also the simple misnaming of 16 June as 'Freedom Day' on page 183 in the book.

However, as a quintessentially South African township school story, Morris Isaacson High School is indeed the seed of a dream of a community's aspirations for a better future for its children. In the democratic context that allows South Africans previously trapped in the geographies of apartheid to live, work, and learn in better-resourced communities and establishments, the story of Morris Isaacson High School reflects the experiences of many township schools now left to fend for themselves in a context stripped of its usual

⁷ In an Appendix, the book lists 82 interviews from 1991 to 2020 with Morris Isaacson High School alumni for the study.

resources. In this regard, it is also a dream that can no longer be deferred for want of a perfect set of conditions and circumstances. It demands, now more than ever, that we reassert and foreground the agency of communities to cultivate the promise of such dreams with whatever resources at their disposal. While Morris Isaacson was catapulted into the centre of the historical moment of the 1976 student uprising like few other schools across the country, *A seed of a dream* demonstrates that 16 June did not make the school and nor can or must it be its sole *raison d'être*. The truth is that schools in our communities are where society cultivates its future. While *A seed of a dream* is a cautionary tale of what not tending to the seed can produce, it also chronicles the virtues of an asset-based approach to education as the history of Morris Isaacson High School unveils. Finally, *A seed of a dream* is a pathbreaking contribution to South African school historiography and the history of education institutions in general as it sets a noteworthy and significant standard for critical institutional histories that enable us to learn from our past more than simply remembering it with nostalgia.