

# THE SCHOOL AS A MICROCOSM OF COMMUNITIES AND THEIR HERITAGE AND THE NEED TO ENCAPSULATE THIS IN THE WRITING OF SCHOOL HISTORIES

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## ***Abstract***

The writing of school histories is a neglected sub-discipline in the study of heritage. It is, however, imperative that this aspect of the broad tapestry of our local and national heritage is analysed and preserved. As a microcosm of the community which it serves, a school reflects and engages with the greater political, social and economic issues and dynamics at any particular stage in its development. Often relegated to a purely celebratory document marking a centenary, half or quarter century, the account could be purely anecdotal or touch only on those aspects of the school which have contributed to school traditions, neglecting the broader framework within which it functions and with which it engages. It is critical that this aspect of heritage is preserved by historians who take the effort to research and write about this tiny snippet of our national heritage.

**Keywords:** Christian National Education; Democracy; Polarisation; Transition; Power relationships; Microcosm.

## **Introduction**

South African schools have been inextricably linked to the national political discourse for many years. The seminal events which were the defining moments in our society not only had a direct influence on the content of what is taught in schools, but also on teaching methodology and the broad framework of education policy and legislation. At the turn of the previous century Milnerism ushered in an era of exclusive English education. Half way through the twentieth century the Afrikaner Nationalist government thrust Christian National Education to the fore. During the 1950s through to the

late 1980s a major polarisation took place in line with the implementation of apartheid policies. From 1990 to 1994 was a watershed in both the national political discourse and the direction education would take. With the advent of democracy a new era of experimentation dawned. Initially the key approach was to discard the old and usher in new policies, legislation, curricula and methods as rapidly as possible without pausing to consider the retention of some of the systems in place on the few islands of excellence. In the last decade a shift has been taking place in this regard and the pendulum is swinging back to a rather more balanced view of sound education policies and principles.

At every stage the wider dynamics of political events have had an impact on schools. During the apartheid years resistance, defiance, collaboration, compliance and opposition characterised the range of responses to state policy. The polarisation of South African education has left an unhappy legacy of an education system with world class institutions juxtaposed with utterly dysfunctional schools in close proximity. Indeed, every era has had to deal with the legacy of a previous dispensation which stirred up collaborative passion and total resentment in almost equal measure. Schools have at times been the battleground on which a power struggle and battle of wills played themselves out. At no stage, though, could any school function outside of the context of the turmoil which characterised South African society and politics. The response to the broad context had to be somewhere on the continuum between collaboration and combative opposition. Even non-public (private/missionary) schools were sucked into this uncomfortable vortex.

ISJ Venter says in his book History of Education: ‘the individual human life does not escape the multi-chequered character of temporality: if we analyse the time of a single educator or educationist for example, we find that it is integrated with different “times”, among others with the national, educational, social, religious, philosophical and other temporality.’<sup>1</sup> In few societies does this hold true more than in South Africa. Teachers and schools are enmeshed very closely with the era and context of this transitional society. South Africa has been a society in transition not only during the democratic era since 1994. Indeed, since the South African War (1899-1902) and the establishment of Union in 1910, the major issues concerning race and ethnicity, political and economic power and social cohesion have not been adequately settled. The Afrikaner’s struggle for power, in tandem with and subsequently superseded by the African ascendancy, has characterised much of this period. Schools have had to serve communities grappling with these issues and have been at

<sup>1</sup> ISJ Venter, *History of Education* (Butterworths, Durban, 1979), p. 68.

the cutting edge of these developments.<sup>2</sup>

It is critical that the experiences and contributions of those educators and pupils involved in the struggles of the past few decades be recorded. It is a fallacy that history is merely a record of the contribution of prominent politicians and economic giants. Ordinary people make history, are engaged with the policies, curriculum and methodologies that prevail at any given time and make extraordinary contributions to the development of our society. It is these ordinary people at our schools who give their communities a particular “flavour”. A study of the way in which national policy affects schools and the way in which schools deal with the other powerful institutions in society is essential. The school is a microcosm of the community in which it exists and which it serves and is worthy of analysis. A society has a history because someone takes the effort to write it.

In his biography of his late father, Jan Smuts jnr. records the words of the general on the fly-leaf of his book *Holism and Evolution*:<sup>3</sup>

*To see a world in a grain of sand,  
And a heaven in a wild flower -  
Hold infinity in the palm of the hand  
And eternity in an hour.*

Indeed, the school in the context of society at large, is that microcosm. Each school has a history which has contributed to the greater whole which constitutes the South Africa in which we live today. That history should be recorded and celebrated. It is part of the rich heritage of this country.

In the *Long walk to Freedom* Nelson Mandela doffs his hat to the youth of Soweto who, on 16th June 1976 started the process of dismantling Bantu Education in South Africa by rising up against an oppressive system. “The events of that day reverberated in every town and township of South Africa. The uprising triggered riots and violence across the country.”<sup>4</sup> The events which followed were triggered by individuals such as Seth Mazibuko, a student at a Soweto school, who assumed the mantle of leadership. The role of an individual and a school community in eventually bringing down an oppressive system must not be underestimated. It is not always the prominent politicians of the day who call the shots!

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2 S Jeppie, (ed), *Toward new Histories for South Africa* (Juta, Cape Town, 2004), pp. 28-30.

3 JC Smuts, *Jan Christian Smuts* (Cassell, Cape Town, 1952), p. 287.

4 N Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom* (Abacus, London, 1994), p. 575 .

Many of the school histories which have been written in South Africa are celebratory manuscripts of leading former “Model C” institutions and private schools. It is indeed admirable that a start has been made in recording the contributions of schools to the greater political, social and educational developments in this country. However, the contributions of many other institutions remain in the oral domain. They need to be recorded for posterity. The Education Departments and Universities should encourage this as a sub-discipline of worth.

### **Practicalities: What and how of writing school Histories**

The case having been made for the value of this type of research project, it is critical that funding does not become an insurmountable obstacle. A school that wishes to produce a written record of its history could explore a variety of funding options. The institution to which the author of this article is affiliated, The Settlers High School in Cape Town, commissioned him to write a celebratory book on the history of the school spanning some forty years, in 2003.<sup>5</sup> It was immediately decided to produce a “coffee-table” type book which would appeal to both past and present learners, and also deal with broader political and social issues to expand the appeal to those who wish to investigate a slice of South African education history. Generous donations were obtained from the University of Cape Town, the Past Pupils’ Association, past pupils who are leaders in business and a fund raising venture associated with the annual “Big Walk” held at the school. No expense was spared in getting a graphic designer of note to assist with layout and a reputable publishing/printing firm was contracted to produce the final hard cover version. Priced correctly and having made an accurate assessment of the size of the market, the school broke even within weeks of the publication being launched in August 2005. Since then numerous copies have been sold to avid collectors of school histories (a market the school had no idea existed). The national libraries (5 repositories) and local schools and libraries were given copies for their collections, and the school uses some of the books as gifts and for marketing and branding. Despite this, a fair profit has been made on the sale of the book.

Publishing a school history need not be a financial burden if a business-like approach accompanies the publication of what is perceived to be a good quality book (in respect of durability, aesthetic appeal and content).

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<sup>5</sup> PM Haupt, *The Settlers: 40 years towards freedom* (Creda, Cape Town, 2005), (preface).

## **Methodology**

### ***The decision to publish - what approach do we adopt?***

An important commemorative event is a useful starting point. Research will always be a great deal easier the shorter the history, because many of the teachers and pupils will still be contactable and willing to grant interviews. A decade is not too short a duration to be worthy of recording.

Depending on the brand and approach of the particular school, the publication need not be a hard-cover book or a substantial soft-cover publication. A special celebratory magazine would suffice, as long as it addresses the main functions of recording the history and contribution of the school in the local community and its contribution to education in the region or nationally.

Several approaches may be adopted, depending on the brief given the author at the outset.

The approach adopted by the late R Hamburger, author of the Bergvliet High School history, was that of an anecdotal record with tributes and memories throughout. He produced a very readable account of the first fifty years of that school. It is a document that any past learner would delight in reading, yet he has touched on the seminal events which took place at the national and provincial education levels as well as the major political developments which were defining moments in our South African history. A major strength is the comprehensive photographic record of the latter half of the twentieth century at the school.<sup>6</sup>

L Moulton authored the history of Kimberley Boys' High School.<sup>7</sup> His hard cover edition published in 1987 to mark the centenary of that school is a scholarly account of the magnificent contribution of that school to South Africa dating back to the nineteenth century. Included are references to leading figures who have shaped business and politics in South Africa. This was not meant to be a coffee-table book with easy flowing text. Its approach is erudite and scholarly. That is what it purports to be and that is what it has achieved. This is a permanent record of a school's contribution to South Africa which could be used for academic research.

In a similar vein, T J Webster and L Emslie wrote the history of Selbourne College in the Eastern Cape. This also does justice to a school whose history spanned a century. Erudite and scholarly once again, not for light reading,

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<sup>6</sup> R Hamburger, *Bergvliet High School, BHS* (Cape Town, 2007), (foreword p.v).

<sup>7</sup> L Moulton, *KH History* (KBHS Centenary Committee, 1987).

but invaluable to students of education in South Africa.<sup>8</sup>

Parktown Boys' High School in Johannesburg, on the other hand, produced a celebratory magazine to commemorate its fiftieth jubilee. It encapsulated the history of the school from its inception in the dusty mining town of Johannesburg until the mid-seventies. Recorded in that document was a detailed account of the contributions of prominent teachers and headmasters as well as pupils who went on to become leaders in academia and industry. This was followed by an updated history of the school in the form of a book which was published some years later. No doubt the original magazine provided much useful material to the author charged with updating the account of the school's history a few years ago. The importance of starting to write the record cannot be underestimated!

Whichever approach is adopted - start writing the record.

### **A changing community - a changing microcosm**

South Africa is a society in the throes of transition and transformation. Since the first schools were able to adopt an open admission policy in the early 1990s, the demographic composition of schools began to change. These changes were most evident in the formerly "white" schools of the apartheid era. Whereas schools had previously been community schools serving particular suburbs with fairly homogenous socio-economic backgrounds, they have in many cases become commuter schools, drawing from a variety of communities. To a certain extent there has been a normalisation, as the rigid demographic divisions foisted on communities by the Group Areas Act which determined where particular ethnic groups could or could not reside, have become less stark. Nevertheless, commuter schools rather than narrow community schools still exist.

Indeed the school is still a microcosm. It is now a microcosm of the commuting community and a study of the issues which dominate the discourse reflects what is occurring in the broader South African setting. There has also been a greater degree of centralisation regarding education legislation and policy. How schools engage with the education authorities, the officials, the politicians and how the curriculum is constructed and delivered is worthy of serious consideration. School histories can give an informative view of the defining issues of South African society by studying the impact of

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<sup>8</sup> T Webster and L Emslie, *Bearers of the Palm: A history of Selbourne College, SSHC*, (East London, 1976).

policies. Policy decisions affect the quality of curriculum delivery - issues such as school fees, statutory requirements regarding fee exemptions for indigent (or purportedly indigent) parents, staff allocations and subsidies established according to poverty/wealth quintiles, all affect the ability of schools to deliver quality education. Funding decisions based on perceptions of “previous disadvantage” rather than current demographic and socio-economic profiles, affect schools and their ability to serve their “new” communities. How schools contribute towards social mobility and the bolstering of a heterogeneous educated and skilled middle class, differ from region to region and community to community. This is worthy of analysis and school historians are well placed to deal with it.

## **Conclusion**

There are indeed schools in South Africa which are world class. There are also many that fail to deliver quality education, or even the basic curriculum. Not all the quality schools are private, or “former Model-C” or even well funded. Yet they deliver! What is it that gives well performing schools the edge? Is it simply teacher commitment, or pupil commitment or some other intangible quality? These schools, too, are a microcosm of their communities. The community and the school has a quality which makes it outperform those in the sea of mediocrity. These are the histories that need to be written! How indeed do we emulate the successful if no-one has documented their route to success.

We are all part of the broader South African society and a local community. The school is a microcosm of the community and as such, it is worthy of study. School histories need to be researched and written not only to preserve our rich tapestry of heritage, but also to contribute to an understanding of that which constitutes a successful institution that can effectively deliver the curriculum.

