

Reading 2

The future trapped in the past

Botshabelo Maja

However motivated teachers may be, many unfortunately find themselves teaching in situations that work **against** systematic learning and healthy development. In 1995, Botshabelo Maja spent a year in a secondary school in a Gauteng township to discover the reality of how such a school might run. The result was a vivid but disturbing first-hand picture of what the contexts of teaching are for many teachers in South Africa. (In Reading 4, Fataar and Patterson call this kind of schooling 'dysfunctional!')

This excerpt from Maja's study paints a picture of what has been happening in all-too-many South African schools. It is descriptively vivid, and is a good example of what has been called 'ethnographic research', but doesn't really suggest **why** teachers and learners behave in the ways he describes or **how** these kinds of behaviour could be changed. In the readings that follow some of these questions are addressed. But why don't you begin suggesting your own answers?

Notes

First days at the school

[...] My impression of pupils at 'Harry Gwala Secondary School' began with an incident I observed on the day the school reopened in January. While I was waiting for the Principal in his office, one boy came in and told the secretary that one of the teachers was calling her. Immediately after the two had left, the boy's friend came in and stole report forms from the cupboard. Incidents such as this characterized the first three weeks of this school's calendar.

[...] In interviews it was established that having failed at a specific

Reading

Harry Gwala is not the school's real name.

This edited excerpt is from Maja, B. 1995. **Future Trapped in the Past: Case Study of a Soweto School**. Johannesburg: National Business Initiative.

school, a Soweto student can easily purchase a blank report sheet for fifty rand and fill it in to his or her advantage. This enables a student to move to another standard at another school.

[...] Throughout these (early) weeks the main things that teachers and pupils were doing involved issuing reports to pupils after they had returned school textbooks, admitting new pupils, distributing exercise and available textbooks, allocating teachers to subjects, drafting the timetable, allocating pupils to their classrooms, and hanging around in the corridors. Actual teaching began in earnest on 31 January without the timetable, which was not yet ready, so teachers would attend classes at random.

Physical facilities

[...] 'Harry Gwala Secondary School' appears to be a typical township school. [...] The school enrolled 1 390 pupils in 1994. [...] The school building consists of a single-storey structure divided into eight smaller blocks. It has twenty-eight classrooms, two staff rooms, the Principal's office, and what was originally a laboratory. About twenty classrooms are occupied by pupils and are in a comparatively good condition. This is the case since the school was renovated by the *DET* in September 1993.

Most windows are still intact except for four or five, which are broken. The classroom doors have not been removed, though almost ten of them have had their handles either removed or broken. Of the other eight classrooms that are not being used, three were not renovated in 1993 and are therefore not being used. Four had their doors stolen in 1994 and pupils consequently stopped using them. They were unused not only because of the cold weather, but mainly because boys from the surrounding location turned them into the main 'hang-around' centres in the evenings and left them dirty by burning the desks and relieving themselves indoors. Ultimately, pupils could not keep up with the daily cleaning.

All classrooms have blackboards, though over fifteen of them are not in a good condition. They shake when teachers write on them, and parts of some have been removed. Electricity is working in one of the staff rooms and in the Principal's office. Toilets are too dirty and blocked for pupils to use, except for the ones used by teachers. The drainage system of the school often fails and pupils are usually forced to go and drink water in the neighbouring houses. The schoolyard is fenced, but various holes have been opened in the fence, which pupils use to get in and out of the school.

Graffiti can be seen on most walls, including inside the Principal's office. There were about five break-ins in 1994, with chairs and stationery being the main items stolen. Most of the school records have been sto-

DET: the acronym of the old, apartheid-created, Department of Education and Training. It was responsible for school education for 'African' learners outside 'homeland' areas.

len as a result of the break-ins. 'We will be back' is one of the messages inscribed on the wall of the Principal's office by one of the vandals. 'The message was left the same day the office had been repainted, and we felt that we could not compete with people who seemed to be bent on destroying anything beautiful that the school does. That's why the wall is still like this,' the Principal told me.

The school has deteriorated since 1989 when it was adopted by a private company and renovated. A new library and a well-furnished wood-work room were built but had deteriorated to a state where I saw no evidence of such renovations, except for basic renovations of doors and windows that were repaired in September 1993. Burglar-proof doors were also installed in June 1994. Since then the school has had two guards. They are often threatened with death when they are doing their job. Sometime between 1992 and 1993 one guard was shot dead in the schoolyard and his gun was also stolen.

Resources for teaching and learning

The school has a television set, video recorder, and typewriter. They are all kept at the caretaker's house since there are constant break-ins at the school. They are used by teachers who arrange educational videos for pupils to watch, about two to four times a month, and particularly towards examination times. They were provided by the DET earlier in 1994, after the previous ones were stolen.

The school has no telephone. This has been the case for the last four years after the receiver had been stolen a number of times. The Principal uses his home telephone and constantly has to travel to nearby schools to receive messages. Teachers use public telephones in the shops about three kilometres down the road. The school has one secretary, but the Principal believes that they should have two secretaries, because, according to DET regulations, they qualify for two.

There are 305 desks, 199 tables, and 224 chairs. The school was provided with about 230 chairs by the neighbouring school after, according to the Deputy Principal, various requests to the DET met with no response. 'You will see,' the Deputy Principal told me, 'these chairs will all be gone within a month. Somewhere out there there's a good market for chairs.' Pupils, especially Standard 6s, used to sit on top of the tables and share desks in threes, until the neighbouring school helped in the middle of the year.

The pupils

Just over half of the pupils belong to COSAS, with PASO having just below half. In 1993, PASO gained popularity to the detriment of COSAS because of PASO's militant image. Nevertheless, the overall involvement of pupils in politics is not intensive and in fact dwindled, so that no student meetings

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COSAS: the acronym for The Congress of South African Students;

PASO: the acronym for the Pan-Africanist Student Organization

were held after the April election.

Issues of popular culture and appearance have superseded politics as major concerns on the minds of pupils at 'Harry Gwala'. Most of the boys' main aspiration is to drive their own BMW 5-series cars. Leisure time is usually spent hanging around the shops at night, and at weekends there are kitchen parties, stokvels, birthday parties and 'BYOBs' (bring your own bottle). Such leisure time is usually extended to school hours.

Drug and alcohol intake is one of the major practices that pupils, mostly boys, engage in. Drugs, particularly dagga, are sold in the schoolyard. You will find more than fifty boys around this area in groups of between five and ten sharing a 'zol' (dagga pipe). Others come and go, with a few girls joining in here and there. In some cases a few boys might bring 'ipilisi' (Mandrax tablets) to mix with the dagga.

Despite the common occurrence of antisocial behaviour, 'Harry Gwala's' pupils are generally respectful and well behaved. They still have a lot of the touch last seen in olden days when pupils used to hide or run away when they were doing something wrong and a teacher appeared. A few pupils still come to see a specifically committed teacher and ask him or her to clarify aspects they might not have understood in class. In an interview I had with three female Standard 8 pupils, it was very clear that they are ready to learn. What prompted me to talk to them was that I had seen them very often coming into their class teacher's office to ask questions on issues they might have misunderstood in class. They told me that they usually had group discussions during lunch and when there was a free period, but sometimes they were disturbed by other pupils who seemed not to like them and accused them of being 'abantwana baka teacher' (the teacher's kids).

Pupils claim that most of them attend all eleven periods per day, but that most of their teachers do not. My observations at the school urge me to be sceptical about the honesty of pupils' responses in this regard. The usual occurrence at this school is that by lunch – that is, after seven periods – most pupils go home and do not come back. Those who do are usually not taught, as teachers also do not attend their afternoon classes. Thus, judging from such observations, the likelihood is that the same figure that pupils applied to teachers applies to them too. In fact, the most common number of periods of active teaching and learning must be about five periods on a normal day. This is so, because the mornings are usually not used. Classes are supposed to start at eight, but this is usually the time when the bell rings and those who are present go to the assembly, which usually takes up the first period. In any case, most teachers start dropping in between eight and nine.

[...] Another aspect also related to class attendance has to do with the activities that teachers organize together with pupils. One of these relates to sporting activities, which took about a month and disrupted the pres-

ence of pupils in their classrooms. During such interschool competitions, pupils usually practise the whole morning, which is the only educationally productive time under normal circumstances, while teachers do not attend to the remainder of the pupils, arguing that it would be unfair to those who are not in class since they are promoting the name of the school.

School organization

The school generally does not follow the bureaucratic model of school organization. There is no uniformity, nor standardization. For example, two or three teachers might be teaching one subject in the same standard but not moving at the same pace, and hence giving the pupils different tasks at different times. Some teachers do not set tasks for their pupils. It is therefore left to the individual teacher to set his or her own standard.

[...] There is no emphasis placed on professional development. This is left completely up to the teachers. Nonetheless, as mentioned already, most of the teachers are engaged in upgrading their qualifications. However, this is usually to the detriment of the pupils as it takes time away from the classroom, and it is not always clear that the studies improve their teaching. Academic planning and professional consultation, as the Deputy Principal told me, 'should ideally happen, but this works only in certain subjects where they have subject committees'. The majority of teachers seem not to prepare before class and just follow the pattern they have used over the years.

Teaching

[...] No one supervises (the staff), and they are under no obligation to prepare, except for one new male teacher whom I have seen prepare for class daily. Their teaching strategies entail mainly regurgitating what is in the textbooks, giving notes from textbooks, and asking lower-order questions derived from the only textbook that they use. For example, in one of the Geography classes I attended, the teacher drew circles representing various parts of the earth and asked pupils to name them. No attention was given to the roles the various parts play on our planet. Such teaching strategies are practised by most teachers whose classes I attended. Pupils' participation is limited to providing the teacher with answers and, in most cases, such answers are provided in chorus form, which is not discouraged by the teachers.

Parents

Parent participation in this school is minimal. The best attendance the school has ever had was 100 parents at an event to which the parents of more than 1 300 pupils had been invited. However, parent attendance of meetings is

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usually much lower, and the figure runs in the thirties. At one of the parents' meetings I attended, thirty-seven parents and grandparents attended – almost all of them were old women and nine were elderly males. The meeting took place towards the end of the year and most of the parents who were present were not the same as those who attended an earlier parents' meeting. They seemed not to have the slightest idea of what was taking place, since they didn't even know the parent–teacher–student association (PTSA) committee members who represented them. The PTSA members had to introduce themselves to the parents. Virtually none of the agreements and commitments they had made at an earlier meeting had been carried out.

Interaction between pupils and teachers

[...] As one pupil told me, '*Eintlik* [Actually], here in our school there is competition. This competition is like this: teachers say they won't go into class when there are no pupils inside, and, on the other hand, pupils ask what is the use of getting into class when there are no teachers?' So, at the end of the day both parties are outside and no teaching or learning takes place, except for one instance that I observed where a teacher refused to let in pupils who were not in class the previous day, and continued only with those who had been present the previous day. But about half of the class was outside.

[...] The other point related to pupils' interaction with teachers has to do with language use. Most of the teachers at this school are Shangaan speaking. This seems to have affected how they present their lessons in class. As one pupil told me, 'At this school, if you do not know Shangaan you will never come right. These teachers explain in Shangaan and we do not understand them.' I observed this practice in most classes taught by Shangaan-speaking teachers. They usually explain the topics using their mother tongue, with occasional explanations in English.

Interaction between teachers and management

[...] A teacher [...] said, 'He [the Principal] does not delegate jobs and cannot run this school alone. Teachers are never informed of what is taking place in the school. Like now, there were no circulars informing us that there will be a film in the morning. You go to class and you are told by pupils that they are going to watch a film. The previous principal trusted everybody and made everybody feel like they were the Principal.'

[...] I could always tell when entering the school, without checking for the Principal's car, whether he was in or not. What usually happens is that as soon as the Principal goes out, teachers automatically stop going to their classes. Should he be absent for more than an hour, which is usually

the case since he is mostly at outside meetings, no one will be at the school when he comes back. When pupils see that most teachers are not coming to their classrooms, they initiate some game, such as congregating in the centre of the schoolyard and cheering some dancers, and continue with this until they get tired and go home.

Interaction between school and community

[...] In another incident a man who was alleged to have raped one of the school girls in the location at the weekend was hunted for an entire week by male pupils but managed to escape. Also, some of the abductors have friends in the school and get away with it, which results in fear among female pupils. Almost every female pupil I spoke to had a story to tell in this regard, though they differed in proportion. One pupil, who told me she was once forced to get inside a dustbin by some boys, said, 'We don't feel safe in here.' She said they were often forced to use a different route from school because the boys wait for them outside the school. 'You can't remain behind alone. Even if there was something for which you wanted to remain behind, you can't, you just have to leave with the rest or else the consequences are obvious,' one other female pupil told me.

Another aspect related to local community influence on the school has to do with township boys coming to the school for fun. They come to the school in their BMWs, open the volume of their music full blast and dance around the car. This is usually accompanied by girls being propositioned and leaving with the boys. Ice-cream vendors also come into the schoolyard easily at any time. Ice-cream Kombis with their music playing are a common sight in the schoolyard.