



‘Best practice’ in desegregated classroom environments

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This policy brief deals with identifying ‘best practice’ in primary and secondary schools.

Schools in South Africa have been undergoing a series of crucial transformations. These include introducing a framework for improving access to basic education for all, abolishing racially based admissions policies, reformed curriculum, upgrading the infrastructure, improving teacher/management competencies, and establishing a national qualifications framework. Notable challenges that still remain from decades of deliberate neglect of large sectors of the population are learner achievement and race and other inequalities in schools. The Vally and Dalamba study (1999) commissioned by the Human Rights Commission demonstrated negative practices and difficulties experienced by many schools undergoing desegregation.

A study was initiated as a follow up and was conducted against the backdrop that was prompted by the desire of the Department of Education to address the daunting racial and other inequality issues that plague schools.

This study acknowledges that serious problems persist in many desegregated schools, but that there are also some desegregated schools where good things are beginning to happen. This policy brief labels these as ‘best practice’. These indicate that despite the ongoing challenges to innovation there are a growing number of school managers, teachers and parents who are grappling with issues of diversity and inequality in ways that provide the possibility for changing institutional cultures. The study was conducted in nine schools in three provinces (Western Cape, Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal). Study methods included a stakeholder survey and classroom observation over a three-day period, semi-structured interviews with teachers, and focus group interviews with learners

Best Practices:

1. ‘Best practice’ in desegregated schools centred on *inculcating a culture of common humanity* and converged around the theme of fairness, human dignity, equal treatment and respect.
2. *Teacher personality* emerged as one of the main determinants that contributed to ‘best practice’ in class. The personality of the teacher informed not only her approach to the subject matter, but her demeanor, her rapport with learners and her whole perspective of teaching.
3. ‘Edutainment’-Concepts were taught in a *real-life and fun way*. To learn is fun.



4. Learners found learning to be meaningful and exciting when the teacher took the initiative to *incorporate their life-worlds* into the lesson. This afforded the learner the opportunity to relate new knowledge to his/her existing schema and also placed value on his indigenous knowledge system. Teaching and learning material that takes into account different perspectives, race, cultures, etc.
5. Teachers emphasised that *training* should be provided by lecturers who themselves are not only steeped in the theory but also in the practice – the actual experience of teaching in multicultural and interracial classrooms.

Conclusions

A generation of learners coming out of Bantu Education with high expectations of the new system have been let down by the schooling system not only in terms of scholastic performance but also in the extent to which they experience a wholesome appreciation of their diversity and common humanity. Without intervention, the possibility exists that outmoded practices at desegregated schools may persist. Wholesome or inclusive perspectives in, for example, teacher education and curriculum reform are critical in creating a healthy citizenry and a better society able to engage productively with the global community.

Solutions and recommendations:

It is imperative that the hegemonic culture and power relations that are currently playing out at many schools

be interrogated. A concerted effort needs to be made to create spaces at schools where all learners feel a sense of belonging. Where the cultural knapsack with which learners enter school is validated and contributes to the greater pool of knowledge. The values embedded in the South African Constitution and Bill of Rights envision a society that while recognising difference also, above all, strives to achieve national unity. The human rights and democratic values though inscribed in our Constitution are not automatically reproduced in individuals.

Recommendations

Issues of diversity and social cohesion are at the heart of the nation-building project. In order to transcend the debilitating and divisive legacies of apartheid education it is essential to infuse the 'best practice findings' of the study throughout all sectors of our education system. Our success at the macro level depends on the level of investment made at the micro level where it matters most: the quality of the school environment.

Schools, and teachers in particular, are critical agents in promoting the realisation of the Constitutional aspirations. They play a pivotal role in preparing learners for the future workforce and leaders of this country; and by empowering them with intercultural literacy that ensures a better citizenry. To address the current problems we propose the following initiatives to be implemented by the Department of Education:



- Providing in-service training of teachers: training the trainer by means of ongoing workshops;
- utilising approaches such as experiential learning and simulations.

Trainers first need to be equipped to constructively address the various forms of intolerance. Identified experts in this field need to conduct the initial workshops where they train a broader corps of trainers who will in turn widen the process to the farthest reaches of the teaching fraternity. The cascading model will only be effective if it is coupled with effective monitoring and evaluation to ensure sustainability. At the end of such workshops teachers should be awarded a certificate attesting their multicultural competency and credits earned accepted towards an academic degree for those intending to study further.

Financial implications

In the short term, the training cost will be high but would be significantly lowered in the long term. Teachers are the lynchpin in this process and if they can be empowered with the findings of this research study that documented 'best practice' (what actually works well in desegregated classroom environments) then we are well on our way to yielding lessons that could be applied more generally, in the demanding contemporary settings of multicultural social relations and in improving the quality of teachers and ultimately the quality of education in South Africa.

