



# When Politics and Emotion Meet

## EDUCATIONAL CHANGE IN RACIALLY DIVIDED COMMUNITIES

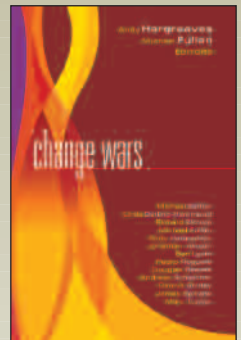
Post-apartheid South Africa offers many lessons about adapting to changes for other racially divided communities.

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BY JONATHAN D. JANSEN

**A** white undergraduate student returns from a field trip to the Apartheid Museum and angrily challenges the professor for what she feels is a lack of balance in dealing with the pain of loss among whites. A newly arrived black professor flies into a rage when he is instructed by an unwitting white campus manager to move his car from parking reserved for academics. During a casual lunch conversation, a white professor breaks down and sobs as she recognizes, for the first time, the complicity of whites in the oppression of her black colleagues. White students furiously protest the university's plan to integrate the student residences for the first time in almost 100 years. Black students submit a letter to the dean of their school complaining about deliberate racist jibes from a professor in the course of her teaching. Black administrators send a delegation to the university authorities claiming that the institution's promotion policies favor white administrators even when they have less experience and knowledge. And a poor, white parent confesses tearfully to the black dean that he does not have any money to fund his daughter's university education and that she might have to give up her dream of becoming a teacher.

I experienced events like these every day during my leadership at a former white



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university that had committed to physical desegregation, but which faced enormous hurdles with respect to social integration among black and white academics, administrators, and students.

From 2000 until 2007, I was the first black dean of education at the formerly all-white University of Pretoria in the capital city of South Africa. Most of the staff members were white, most students were white, the institutional culture was unmistakably white, and the curriculum contained distinctively

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white knowledge. The country had changed as it emerged from the five-year presidency of Nelson Mandela, but institutions do not change as quickly as the political systems around them, and so my unwritten responsibility was to contribute to the transformation of a 100-year-old white university into a racially and culturally inclusive environment that reflected the democratic values embedded in the country's brand new constitution.

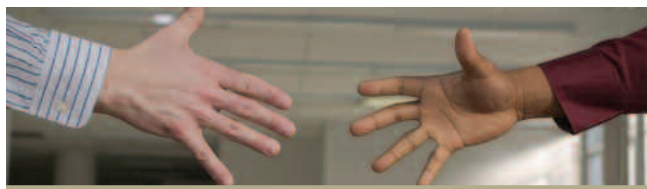
I faced the challenge of leading in a time when black and white academics and students suddenly found themselves in the same halls and classrooms for the first time. Still more challenging, I faced the task of identifying the role of leadership within deeply divided communities and determining how emotions and politics shape the terms (and outcomes) of interpersonal and curricular engagement within post-conflict settings. To say that change is complex, challenging, and contested within recently deracialized and deracializing institutions is to almost understate the dilemma. It is emotionally, spiritually, and psychologically taxing and transformational at the same time.

Change is especially taxing when those leading the change are a minority within a large organization — in this case, an organization of more than 40,000 students and more than 2,000 staff on seven campuses. Pushing change in this context meant altering the racial demographics of the academic and administrative staff, the racial profile of the student body, the racial character of curricular knowledge, and the essentially white core of the institutional culture. But since the institution existed within a societal envelope

where reparation (distributing social benefits disproportionately to the black majority) and reconciliation (retaining the social support of the white minority) were understood among leaders to be simultaneous commitments, the emotional burden was enormous.

Despite this stress, change is also transformational. Intense engagement between white and black staff and students, and between black leaders and white followers, transforms the ways in which those occupying the same learning and living spaces begin to encounter each other around critical issues of race, identity, history, and culture. These critical dialogues, organized through what I have elsewhere called a post-conflict pedagogy (Jansen in press), begin to chip away at racial certainties and cultural dogmas. The process transforms blacks and whites alike in a context in which common citizens are compelled to learn and live — and remember the past — together.

What do challenges of integration such as these mean for leaders in divided societies, and how do emotions figure within leadership that operates in a racial minefield where even the slightest action can be read as favoring one side over another? Based on our recorded experiences and ongoing research on leadership in such contexts, I offer the following seven theses as a platform for thinking about a new politics of emotions in pursuing educational change (Jansen 2006, 2007).



#### **THESIS 1:**

We must recognize the politics of emotions that energize behaviors.

A complaint, an aggressive act, or a quiet withdrawal in racially divided communities cannot be resolved by only organizational alterations, policy reform, or curricular change. Such expressions of pain, anxiety, or pressure are human problems that must be approached directly. In the case of outright aggression or racial insult, the direct approach must name the act in order to resolve it.

Once that is done, the challenge is to address underlying causes. The young white woman who returned from the Apartheid Museum had just had a terrifying experience. Until that day, her belief system rendered blacks as the aggressive enemy and whites as decent and civilized. Everything she was told about

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her people fell apart as she encountered, for the first time, the racial oppression and economic exploitation of whites on blacks. To simply dismiss this young woman as an incorrigible racist is to incite racial anger and conflict on both sides of the divide.

Once her hostility is rendered unacceptable, her humanity must be accessed. As white students recognize evil in what they have lost, the task of the leader is to engage their fears and anxieties, their sense of loss and defeat, and the unbearable burden of whiteness. In short, the emotions expressed are not irrational, nor do they show a lack of interest; rather, they are, inescapably, political expressions.

This example raises challenging questions for teaching and teacher preparation, for it takes incredible skill and the capacity for empathy to even begin to engage students in ways that lead to productive dialogues about such difficult subjects as race and representation. It is even rarer for teachers to be able to recognize the underlying politics of emotion at play.

### **THESIS 2:**

The change strategy cannot create victims.

It is easy in a divided society like South Africa to take the side of the black person; historically, it is true, black people were victims of apartheid in every sense — economically, educationally, physically, and psychologically. But change does not happen when the other side — the second generation of whites (young people born after apartheid) — are treated as the oppressors. They, too, are victims. They are victims of a deficient education system based on white supremacy. They are the victims of lies and deceit that will trouble their lives for years to come. They are victims who have to come to terms with the reality of their parents as part of the oppressive classes that ruled with impunity for so long. They lack access to the cultures and languages of their fellow black citizens. They are the first generation of white South Africans to come into a democracy with racial knowledge handed down to them from past generations, but without the racial power of the past, which has been taken away from them.

There is another dimension to this sense of white victimhood: When white — especially Afrikaner — students talk about the distant past, they speak of their own oppression in the concentration camps of the British during the South African Wars at the turn of the previous century. They speak of white poverty in the early part of the 20th century and the accompanying sense of desperation that fueled Afrikaner na-

tionalism. They speak of tribal heroes who trekked across the vast plains of South Africa, overcoming the elements and the natives to establish new towns and

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cities. When white and black students, therefore, confront each other in the university classroom, “the clash of martyrological memories” is on display (Hoffman 2004, pp. 140-141). Leaders must take both sides into account without slipping into the dangerous terrain of moral relativism. The atrocities of apartheid as a crime against humanity demand that white South Africans concede and recognize their role in the perpetration of that horror. But in doing so, the change leader nevertheless accepts that there is hurt on both sides and moves with empathy rather than condemnation to enable a critical dialogue to take place.

### **THESIS 3:**

The problem must be named and confronted.

The post-conflict pedagogy being proposed here could be misread as a superficial healing process in which victims and villains are “recognized” without the need to confront and overcome the real problems of racism, tribalism, sexism, and classism that persist in any society. However, quite the contrary is true. What makes educational change possible is that the expressed and the underlying problems that bedevil human relationships are confronted directly. The question is not whether this must be done, but rather how, for the approach is absolutely crucial in resolving conflict within divided societies.

In the case of the lecturer who intersperses her teaching with snide racial comments about the capabilities of black students, a leader must make it clear that racism is unacceptable, that a higher standard of behavior is required, and that the continuation of such acts of racial insult will lead to dismissal. This must happen regardless of the personal trauma or ethnic history of the group with which this white academic associates. The confrontation is not about the lecturer, *per se*; it is about broader communication to the watchful audience of campus dwellers and surrounding communities for whom taking a stand is an

indication of what is acceptable and what is not, and of the position of leadership on this potentially explosive matter. Everyone appreciates a firm and open position on controversial matters. Ambivalence, however, virtually guarantees the continuation of such destructive behavior.

There are politics at stake here, so the approach matters. It matters who speaks, how he speaks, and what is said. It matters that the response to the situation is consistent with what is said everywhere else in the organization. It matters that the party charged with this behavior is presumed innocent and given a chance to defend herself. It matters that there is follow-up by leadership. It matters that there is a clear indication of support to the teacher to enable her to change her language, attitudes, and beliefs. And it matters greatly that there are consequences for such behavior.

#### **THESIS 4:**

Leaders must exemplify the expected standard of behavior.

This seemingly old-fashioned point is vitally important in divided communities. Leaders are watched for their affiliations. A leader whose circle of friends and associates are only white or only black cannot speak with any moral authority about the need for social and cultural integration among teachers and students. Leaders who compose their leadership teams of those who belong to the same racial or religious affiliation are unable to demand respect and attention when urging others to pursue social justice.

Those who observe leadership behavior, especially students, take their cues from their leaders. Their leaders must show the moral standard they seek to instill in their followers if they are to gain their trust. The same is true of staff at all levels of an organization. A head of department is unlikely to move firmly toward greater racial inclusiveness in staff appointments within his or her realm of authority if the principal or dean of his school or university does not lead the way in making such affirming appointments.

The problem, of course, is that making positive choices often involves considerable emotional risk. Our research has shown consistently that white principals who open their schools deliberately to children and teachers from other races risk alienation from within their own group. For example, they are called names, their children no longer get invited to family parties, and they are ignored in public spaces by long-time friends and associates. These consequences are

real and could cut off leaders from warm and familiar emotional networks. This is even more difficult for students, of course, who are at an age when the need

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for affirmation and acceptance is intense. Still, our research shows that leaders who lead through the power of demonstration open up broader, more inclusive, and enriching networks of friends and colleagues that liberate them from their own prejudices. Without such leadership, educational change in hostile environments simply cannot happen.

#### **THESIS 5:**

We must engage emotionally with students in their world.

It is impossible to change students' deep knowledge and emotions about the past by simply treating the subject as a cognitive or intellectual problem. That is, the assumption that, by introducing new knowledge in the curriculum that is logical and rational, one can change the minds of those in divided communities (staff or students) is quite simply wrong. The much more complex problem here is what I call knowledge in the blood — the complex spiritual, emotional, psychological, and political learnings that together constitute knowledge, which comes from the heart as much as from the head.

To shift this knowledge in the blood, or understandings of the heart, requires emotional engagement with the subject. In my work, this meant visiting students in their homes, engaging them in student residences, conversing with them on campus, observing them in the classroom, making contact with their parents, and showing interest in their extracurricular endeavors. There is no simple pedagogy here, for the delivery of an erudite lecture to hundreds of students on emotional topics like race and privilege and then withdrawing into professorial seclusion is to create a distance that cuts off opportunities for deeper engagement.

This strategy does not simply involve the changing

of the student; it also involves the changing of the teacher, for by entering these different realms of student life, it is possible to understand the ways in which they come to gain emotional knowledge, and why the simplistic retreat into academic training as the solution does not make any sense. The complexity here must therefore be understood so that attitudes can be changed; there are no shortcuts outside of deep involvement with students. Only in this way is it possible, for example, to understand the repulsion felt by white students about living with black students in the same room. Recognizing and coming to grips with the fact that all socializing agencies — the family, the school, the church, cultural associations, and peer groups — together emphasized the same message of racial exclusivism and race supremacy over and over again aids in the understanding of why it is so difficult to change hearts.

#### **THESIS 6:**

Teachers and principals are themselves emotional actors.

The idea that the student is the target of change is commonplace in the educational change literature. But what about those who teach? Have they somehow come to terms with the politics of emotions in their own lives, and can they therefore be trusted to engage young people in this most troubling of subjects — race, emotions, and change? In divided communities, as elsewhere, teachers and principals come into schools and universities with personal histories that have shaped their understandings of other people, and they do not simply shake off those emotional and political influences in their own lives when they teach a more inclusive curriculum. Often unconsciously, teachers and leaders make choices, dispense attention, assess literature and tools, organize seating patterns, allocate praise, withdraw support, and associate themselves with other teachers and students on the basis of race.

Consider Max, a teacher of South African history to 11th-grade students for more than 25 years. As a white South African reared in the political vortex of the apartheid years, Max came to understand deeply that the history of white settlement was one of triumph over adversity, of civilization over backwardness, of Calvinist faith against atheistic communism, of freedom against tyranny. He lost members of his family in the border wars, and he witnessed the struggles of his parents against white poverty and their gradual rise, through the discipline of hard work, to a

comfortable though not extravagant middle-class lifestyle. Then Nelson Mandela was elected in 1994, and a new history was suddenly to be taught with very different narratives from the ones he had come to believe and thus relied on to make his choices in life. For him, the teaching of history is emotional knowledge, even though he accepts, in his mind, the inevitability of a new official knowledge.

#### **THESIS 7:**

The environment must accommodate risk.

White students do not rush into pedagogic spaces confessing guilt or acknowledging racism, nor do white parents suddenly own up to years of privilege at the expense of black citizens. Even when such compulsion is felt, it is extremely difficult for human beings to unburden themselves in private or public spaces. This was the most important mistake of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in South Africa: the assumption that whites, given the platform, would stream forward to tell the truth about their complicity in and their benefiting from apartheid. Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the chairperson of the TRC, was adamant that whites should use this invitation not only to speak the truth, but also to advance reconciliation. Of course, this did not happen, and it was for a very good reason: Human beings do not willingly release painful memories, especially not on a public platform, that could draw the ire of victims and impose shame by association.

When I do workshops on risk accommodation within the classroom, invariably a teacher or professor becomes adamant that there can be no reconciliation without truth; they believe people need to acknowledge their racism and their privilege as a very first step, or there is nothing to talk about. This is a particularly Western way of thinking — to “fess up,” as if this is an involuntary reflex to some central command. The explosion of talk shows in American public culture in which the most personal and the most bizarre behaviors are displayed without restraint to live audiences on national television strikes many in the Third World as disgusting. Guilt and shame are more common responses to burdensome knowledge than the apparent reveling in extreme and obnoxious behavior.

Nevertheless, when I sense the adamant position that whites must simply step forward and acknowledge their racism, I ask a simple question: “Do any of you here have a memory of something so painful that you have not shared that memory with anyone, even

those closest to you?” As the thud of this unexpected question takes hold in the room, I scan the faces of the participants as they struggle for a few seconds to process what was just asked. Slowly, most of the hands in the room go up, acknowledging that they possess information known only to them that cannot be spoken. Nothing demonstrates this point more powerfully than the acknowledgment of Nobel Laureate Günter Grass that he had actually been a youthful mem-

## Post-apartheid South Africa holds lessons for racially divided communities everywhere.

ber of Hitler’s notorious Waffen-SS during World War II. For half a century, the author of *The Tin Drum* (first published in 1959) was the moral conscience of post-war Germany, urging his fellow citizens to own up to their terrible knowledge about the Holocaust and their role in that horrendous conflict. But he harbored secret knowledge, which he revealed when he said, “What I had accepted with the stupid pride of youth I wanted to conceal after the war out of a recurrent sense of shame” (Isaacson 2007, p. 13).

It is crucial in a post-conflict pedagogy that the teacher creates an atmosphere and structures teaching-learning episodes in ways that reduce the risk of speaking openly about direct and indirect knowledge. Students must be able to speak without feeling that they will be judged or despised for what they believe. They must know that in a divided classroom, there will be an attempt to “hear them out” even if their ideas are outrageous or offensive. Students must be reassured through the example of the teacher-leader that teachers and leaders can be trusted with such personal knowledge. Clearly, what is true for white students in this example is true also for black students, especially when the latter group is a minority within the classroom.

This creation of risk-accommodating environments certainly does not mean that “anything goes” and that a student can spout offensive words about another group without consequences. Long before the pedagogic encounter, the teacher should have set the atmosphere by explaining the terms of engagement and sharing the rules for dialogue. Such difficult dialogues can only take place if students have trust in the teacher-leader and see the example of reconciliation he or she sets both inside and outside of the classroom.

Nonetheless, such encounters remain risky. I used to speak about risk-removing classroom climates; that is clearly impossible. At best, the teacher will work toward a risk-accommodating environment in which students, in taking risks, are assured that they will be treated fairly and their positions will be given serious consideration regardless of what they believe. It is only when students trust the teacher-leader, however, that the ability to speak honestly is made possible. Then the teacher can take what is said and steer students toward a dialogue that counters racism, sexism, and classism (among other things that divide) and demonstrates the harmfulness and the offensiveness of bigotry in school and society.

### BRIDGING THE DIVIDE

Educational change is combustible at the point where politics and emotions meet. Such is the case in post-conflict societies where educational leaders face special challenges in bridging divides among teachers, staff, and students from rival communities that in the recent past were at war with each other, either literally or figuratively. My research and experience and that of my colleagues points to a post-conflict pedagogy that recognizes, responds to, and works inside the emotional contexts within which the micropolitics of change unfold. But we are only beginning to understand what kinds of leadership and change are possible in the aftermath of conflict. Post-apartheid South Africa holds lessons for racially divided communities everywhere. **K**

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