The death of Nelson Mandela, the great South African fighter for freedom, in December 2013 prompted several colleagues within the World Council of Comparative Education Societies community to come together to think about the significance of his life and his work for education. This book is the result of that coming together. The contributing authors reflect on what his life, the commitments he made and principally the values he took into the struggle for freedom in South Africa mean for education. The point of departure for the book is that of honouring the man. It begins with the argument that the values for which he stood, namely, the unconditional dignity of all human beings, respect for difference and principally his lifelong commitment to justice, have a special significance for how we as inhabitants of an increasingly connected and interdependent world conduct our personal lives, our relationships with one another and with the material and living space which surrounds us. It is an ecological approach. As the world moves into a twenty-first century where, paradoxically, we know so much and yet appear to understand so little, and so find ourselves struggling to create social lives in which all of us can feel respected, can offer respect to others and live lives free of fear and anxiety, the values for which he stood have specific relevance for how we do the important job of teaching and what we put into it. Mandela poses deeply provocative questions about the kinds of lives we seek for ourselves and for everybody else around us.
Nelson Mandela
COMPARATIVE AND INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION: A Diversity of Voices

Volume 42

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Nelson Mandela

Comparative Perspectives of his Significance for Education

Edited by

Crain Soudien
Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), South Africa
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1. AN INTRODUCTION

Nelson Mandela and his Significance for Education

INTRODUCTION

This is the first book dedicated to the significance of Mr. Nelson Mandela for education. The Mandela reading list is long and extensive. It consists of his own work (inter alia, Mandela, 1986, 1994, 2001a, 2001b) and a growing collection of biographies, beginning shortly before his release from prison with the contribution of Meer (1988), followed by Benson (1989) and Lodge (1990) and then with a second wave of writing led by Meredith (1997) in turn followed by Sampson (2000), Boehmer (2008), Stengel (2010), Smith (2010), and most recently, Bundy (2015). There have also been books on the importance of Mandela for the struggle in Palestine and Israel (Adam & Moodley, 2005), books on Mandela's relationship with children (Gordon, 2002), and, interestingly, a book on Mandela and his relationship with food (Trapido, 2008). The complete oeuvre extends to several coffee table type books, journal articles and a continuous feed of popular writing relating to a wide range of subjects and issues. Much of this last genre of writing, not unexpectedly, was produced around the time of his death in 2013.

Vast as this corpus of work is, surprisingly, there is not a dedicated focus of attention on the significance of education for Mandela or about what his own significance for education might be. It is surprising because, actually, he devoted much of his public life to the cause of education. He lost no opportunity to emphasize the importance of learning. His earliest recorded speeches included references to education. In the collected compendium of Mandela quotations put together by Hattang and Venter (2011) the space accorded to education covers three pages. It is the third largest subject area in the book after the sections devoted to Liberation and Leadership. Significant, moreover, about the leadership section, which covers five pages, is that it has many entries which relate to educatedness. Of the 2000 quotations collected and the more than 300 subject areas categorized by the editors in the book, more than thirty are about education, learning, thinking and reasoning. Why it then has taken so long for a Mandela education book to emerge is a curious fact. This book is a small attempt to make good this absence.

The initial impetus for this book came from a global acknowledgement in the comparative education community of the importance that Mandela holds for the struggles for social justice and by a sense of the sheer scale of his global
C. SOUDIEN

stature. The idea of the book was stimulated by the idea of paying tribute to the man. The process of putting the work together made clear, however, that his educational significance was and remains considerable. The book unfolds in three broad movements. The first five chapters locate the significance of Mandela for education. They are made up of the contributions of Moodley and Adam, Abdi, Rule, Mngomezulu and le Cordeur. The chapters provide and use insights into Mandela’s life experience to draw out key educational lessons. A second section consists of the work of Nasongo, Mukonyi and Nyatuka, Tomlinson-Clarke and Clarke and Mukherjee. The value of these three essays is their explanation of Mandela for contexts beyond South Africa. Nasongo and his colleagues relate Mandela to the pantheon of African scholars, Mukherjee to educational innovation in India and Tomlinson-Clarke and Clarke to educational partnerships between South Africa and the United States of America. The last four chapters by Badat, Sayed and Badroodien, Brook Napier and Soudien look critically at the legacy of Mandela. They show what this legacy consists of in terms of its achievements, and most importantly, for its failures.

In this introduction I talk to the question of Mr Mandela’s significance. I try to show how this significance can be understood in educational terms.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF MANDELA

It needs to be acknowledged that there is in the current period in South Africa of 2016 an upswell of criticism of Mandela and the general politics he was assumed to stand for. It needs to be said that there has always been fierce opposition to the politics of the African National Congress with which Mandela, as its most visible public leader in the latter half of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century, is associated. This opposition has come from both the left and the right. The right, for the purposes of this discussion, is not particularly relevant. Its calling card continues to be embossed with the signs and symbols of white supremacy – the belief in the unquestioned superiority of what is described as European civilization. The forms that this has taken in South Africa in the apartheid project are well known (see Pelzer, 1963). This view, given its ubiquity in international relations, in its institutionalisation in the cultural, legal-policy and social arenas in many facets of the everyday in the colonial, post-colonial and metropolitan spaces of the world, is deeply problematic. More pertinent for the purposes of this discussion is the view of Mandela on the left, from inside the South African and global liberation movement and from progressive organisations and commentators linked to socialist and communist political positions. Inside South Africa this left is made up of Africanists and African nationalists inside the Pan African Congress, the black consciousness community in organisations such as the Azanian People’s Organisation and socialists of various hues and inclinations in the South African Communist Party, the labour movement and the organisations which trace their origins to the Non-European Unity Movement. The work of Alison Drew (1997) provides the strongest
AN INTRODUCTION

documentary record of the programmatic and strategic positions of this group of people. In recent times Bundy (2014) has also provided some insight into this historical opposition. Important about this opposition, however, has been its impact on political life, political discourse and the actual historical turn of events. Strikingly, while the opposition to Mandela and his politics has not translated into mass popular support, especially in the electoral process in the post-1994 era, it has influenced the language and the approach of the liberation movement considerably. Concepts such as Africanism, non-racialism, non-collaboration and many others have their origins outside of the African National Congress and its alliance partners. Interestingly, up until recent times, vocal and perhaps even eloquent as this oppositional voice to the African National Congress has been, it has not translated into diminished popular support for Nelson Mandela himself.

In the last few years since Mandela’s death, a decided shift in the iconography around him appears to have taken place. In the current period of the student protests in South Africa, in which a significant student voice has emerged, intense dissatisfaction has been expressed with what has been described as post-apartheid’s perpetuation of colonialism. A strong call in the student process is for the country to be decolonised. While there is much debate and discussion about what decolonisation actually means, strident in the demands of the students have been calls for free higher education and a renewal of the curriculum to rid the colonial university of its Eurocentrism. In looking upon the university the students have criticised its perceived commodification – high fees and a market-inspired curriculum – and have centred their critique on the role of Mandela in bequeathing to them a poisoned chalice. They thought they were getting freedom but all they got, they say, was a compromised future of indebtedness and irrelevant education. Students have focused their analysis on the negotiated settlement and the agreement between the apartheid regime and the liberation movement in 1994 which they assert has left them no better off than their parents were before the coming of so-called democracy. They have been vocal in their denunciation of what they are now facing. Malaika wa Azania (2014) provides one with a sense of the language and the attitude many young people in the student movement have taken to the figure of Mandela. Mandela she says is an apologist for whiteness. Interestingly, in many of the forums in which the students have explained their positions they have felt no hesitation to make clear their rejection of Mandela and his comrades and colleagues. Delivering the keynote address at the 15th Ruth First Lecture at Witwatersrand University, in August this year, Leigh-Ann Naidoo (2016) remarked that the anti-apartheid generation had become afraid of the future. She spoke of the idea of revolution which was running through the thoughts and language of the student protest which is currently underway. “Revolution” she said,

warrants attention in particular because it is starkly contrasted by the quick dismissal of talk of revolution by an older generation of anti-apartheid activists. I have heard them say over and over again, ‘we are not in a time of revolution’,
as they shake their heads knowingly. Or they say, with certainty, ‘you cannot justify such action because we are far from the conditions of revolution’; ‘it’s not the time for this or that because we are already in a democracy’… Or perhaps most earnestly, they say ‘there is no need (emphasis in the original) for revolutionary action because the laws and institutions of post-apartheid are sufficient’. (Naidoo, 2016: paragraphs 2–5)

As interestingly, the Nelson Mandela Foundation, the vehicle established by Mandela himself to support the causes behind which he put his weight, has suggested that his period of leadership of the new South Africa was a failure (see Everatt, 2016).

Is this, one has to ask, the turning of the tide against Mandela? Are we seeing here a revision of the Nelson Mandela narrative? There is unquestionably now a revision of the Mandela narrative. But is there a turning of the tide? There is no doubt that the discourse which developed around his very public life, as a politician and as a social figure, was far too often overwhelmed with a tendentious optimism parlayed in unnecessary hyperbole. Romance and selective historical use of fact were its hallmarks. It overlooked significant contradictions that accompanied and even characterised decisions that were made in the course of his role as a leader in the African National Congress and in the making of the new South Africa. It was responsible, more critically, for producing exactly what Mandela himself rejected publicly several times. He said in his book Conversations with myself that he did not want to be remembered as a saint:

One issue that deeply worried me in prison was the false image I unwittingly projected to the outside world; of being regarded as a saint…. I never was one, even on the basis of the earthly definition of a saint as a sinner who keeps trying. (Shea, 2010: para 6 and 7)

That the Mandela narrative is in the process of being made more complex is a good thing. This is very much what this book seeks to achieve. It does not wish to perpetuate the approach which depoliticises him, which even positions him in the role of the endlessly forgiving, endlessly tolerant and endlessly beneficent man. He may have had those qualities, but he was considerably more than that. He made mistakes. He was, as Badat and Sayed and Badroodien say in this book, responsible, at least to some degree, for many of the policy and political problems that the students are now experiencing. He was not without guile and the capacity to manipulate. He was, as Boehmer (2008:5) says, “a consummate shape-shifter”. In that shape-shifting resided forms of masculinity, ethnocentricism and stubbornness which were not unproblematic.

But he was also profoundly more than that. For the purposes of this work, for thinking of his significance for education, several of the chapters seek to bring out the many ways and the many times that he demonstrates a sense of the importance of educatedness that demand attention beyond the many issues which critics correctly
AN INTRODUCTION

raise. One of the most critical, I wish to suggest, is his capacity to manage how an individual could be managing him or herself in the maelstrom of modernity with all its contradictions and possibilities. I make the argument here that Mandela represents in significant ways what a thinking, or better, a thought-ful, ontology represents in modernity. What is a thought-ful ontology?

A thought-ful ontology is an awareness of oneself in the relational ecology of social difference. It is the capacity to live, relationally, in a fully aware sense, of one’s own capacity to do good or evil and the capacity to look for good and evil in the larger social world in which one lives. It brings together, and this is its relevance for modernity, the full spectrum of one’s knowledges, and puts them to work ethically. No part of it is sublimated or privileged. In the case of Mandela, it is his full historical inheritance – tradition, royalty, urban South African township life with its deprivations, toxins and stimuli, the modern university, modern political structures and instruments, popular culture and aesthetics, and, critically, his sense of his own gendered nature. It is all there. He is a member of the abaThembu, he is African and male, but he is also modern, educated and sophisticated. The ontology which he develops is the hallmark of the identity he deliberately crafts for himself, his sense of self. The politics of this ontology, as I argue in the closing chapter of this collection, sometimes struggles. It struggles at a personal and at a larger social level. In it one sometimes sees Mandela making wrong political choices. But in the way he comes to a sense of how he as a modern subject should be making his way through the world he demonstrates acute self-awareness and sensitivity to the needs and requirements of others. This self-awareness is evident in his dealings with the full spectrum of the social and cultural world to which he is exposed, from his traditional Thembu clan to the British monarchy. In all of these spaces he remains completely confident of his unconditional subject status as a full human being. His Africanness remains a deep part of his identity. It accompanies his every move. But it is never all that he is. He never allows it to prefigure his thinking or his being. Neither, on the other hand, does his standing as a modern, so-called Western educated man come to predetermine what he does and how he thinks. His whole civilizational repertoire is his to call on. He is not a bifurcated, schizophrenic modern. In the African context, against the historic delegitimation of Africa and Africanness, this capacity to embrace and work with his full inheritance is extraordinary. He finds his centring through thinking. He emerges as an individual – his own self – but he is always connected.

Two features of Mandela’s subjecthood are important to pay attention to. The first is his sense of his own humanity. It never accedes to any suggestion of inferiority. He is the equal of all who walk the world with him. But, and this is the second, it never takes away from others their right to exactly that which he seeks for himself. He is no more or less than they. How is this educational? That which makes this subjecthood educational is that he realises that it is taught. What is in people’s heads is not natural. They are not born with it. They come to learn this in the environments in which they find themselves. One of his most powerful quotations is that which
speaks to and about racism. Racism, he says, has taught people how to hate “and, if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally than its opposite” (Hattang & Venter, 2011:197). Mandela would make many more comments which have been used, as is reflected in this book, to inspire and motivate. But it is this quote which takes one to the heart of how he sought to manage himself. This self-management was informed by the understanding that he could take control of himself, control of how he would look upon the world around him, and, fundamentally, how ontologically he would control his relationships with people around him. It is a powerful statement of learning. That he did not say more about this is a regret. But, as I try to show in the closing chapter of this book, he lived the learned way. He learnt his way into his relationships. He did not simply let them take whatever course. He learnt. And he acted upon his learning. I hope that this provides a stimulus for coming to understand Mandela in deeper ways.

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AN INTRODUCTION


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2. BECOMING MANDELA

Educational Implications of his Leadership

The popular perception of Mandela portrays him as a secular saint and a universal icon. Most of the multiplying biographies border on hagiography. This romanticized image of a miracle maker fosters myths, not political literacy. Even a moral icon is better understood as a complex person, a political leader with virtues and vices, an individual full of contradictions with views evolving over time and under changing circumstances. Furthermore, if lessons are to be learned from Mandela’s public role, the context of his actions needs to be taken into account. Controversial decisions can only be assessed against other options available at the time and contested decisions judged against universal moral criteria rather than an idealized image to be emulated.

QUALITIES OF LEADERSHIP

In this chapter, Mandela’s special leadership qualities are described. These include: (1) A political trajectory – he became a leader, he grew and learned, using prison as an opportunity; (2) he observed, listened and learned from ‘the other’, avoiding and thereby transcending stereotyped categorizations and embracing more nuanced understandings; (3) he stressed hope and agency and (4) he worked toward the common good and embraced compromise. The question then to be posed is: what implications do these qualities have for our educational philosophy and system?

Characterizing political icons by their impact on followers, as *Time Magazine* (May 5, 2014) did by including Hitler, Stalin and Mao among the 100 influential leaders of the 20th century, is misleading. Influence or charisma does not equate with morality, but often demagoguery, despotism and authoritarianism. In this analysis great political leaders possess five overriding features: vision, balanced by realism, integrity, courage and resilience. Mandela displayed all five attributes: the vision of non-racialism and equality of all citizens; pragmatism rather than dogmatism in dealing with the oppressors, both in his dealings with his jailers and later in negotiations with the still powerful minority regime; the personal integrity of resisting opportunistic compromises; the courage to speak out against Nigerian or Zimbabwean strongmen and many other controversial issues in his caucus; the resilience to press for his ideals, even to the point of humiliation by his National Executive Committee on the irrational Aids policy of his successor.

*C. Soudien (Ed.), Nelson Mandela, 9–16.
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When Mandela finally passed away, after undignified expropriation of his stature and opportunistic interventions to keep him alive, the entire world celebrated his life. Global media representatives had been vying for prime space and were ready to get the best location from which to report the spectacle. Personal commentary on his life by those who were associated with him was voraciously solicited. He was described as a ‘secular saint’, a ‘moral beacon’, as having a ‘matchless humanity’, all of which he shared with the entire world. What made for this widespread recognition and adulation? Charisma is only a partial explanation. ‘Mandela magic’ represents a friendly face of hope to a decolonizing struggling continent, where one leader after another failed to sustain hope. Mandela filled this gap. Here was a man who put a positive spin on life, despite 27 years of incarceration. Many South African whites absolved themselves of their racism by praising Mandela. His smile and gestures of reconciliation radiated hope. As a cosmopolitan patriot, he represented modernity without abandoning his roots. He connected well with all whom he met regardless of faith, colour, national origin, wealth or status. He served as an example of a universal humanity where the pressure of calcifying racial walls and barriers under apartheid conveyed the inevitability of revolutionary violence.

PRISON LESSONS AND TACTICS

His years in prison seemed not in vain. There are always unintended consequences. What his prison years enabled were (1) the opportunity to read, reflect, strategize with other prisoners dedicated to a common cause and subject to similar circumstances; (2) the development of a more nuanced understanding of power at all levels, from the power of the governing regime to the power of the lowly prison warden; (3) the recognition that they were in it for the long haul and therefore had to develop strategies for negotiating better terms for their day to day survival. This he did without compromising or kowtowing for privilege. (4) He learned to ‘read’ and understand more deeply the prison warden, their lives and needs, and to turn this knowledge to the prisoners’ advantage. This entailed seeing them too as human beings, deprived of normal lives, isolated on an island, as less educated even than those they guarded, as lacking everyday survival skills when it came to dealing with the law and struggling with the English language, which limited their communication with others. Yet they also had the power to make everyday life for the prisoners tolerable. (5) Given this communication gap, he learned Afrikaans, a stigmatized language, associated with the state’s imperious attempts to impose it on subordinate groups. Learning the language of the ‘oppressor’ met with the derision of other prisoners, and entailed some risk-taking on his part. When asked why, he mentioned that it was a disadvantage not to know a language spoken by most whites and coloureds. Mandela added an emotional component: “When you speak Afrikaans, you know, you go straight to their hearts” (Stengel, 2012:135). Beyond these ‘instrumental’ reasons was the Gandhian appeal to delve into the psyche of opponents and seek out the ‘humanity’ within.
Mandela was able to reel in and influence the younger, more radical incoming prisoners, who saw the prison wardens as synonymous with the state and vented their resentment against them, affirming a principled resistance regardless of personal consequences. Mandela appealed to them to tone this down, by differentiating the white Afrikaners employed on the island from the power holders of the state. At the same time, the self-assertive behaviour of Black Consciousness activists informed him about how things had changed in the world from which he had been shut off. For example, he had a quiet admiration for a new inmate who would not remove his cap in the presence of the commandant, and when asked to do so, he asked ‘WHY?’ thereby challenging authority (Personal Communication, Neville Alexander, September 5, 2001). The leeway gained from forging more amenable relations with the guards, enabled the prisoners to create space to strategize and plan, while completing their chores. It forged contacts among them which transcended earlier ideological divisions and fears about each other.

What can be gleaned from this iconic figure was, first, to disaggregate the ruling group and not view all members as monolithic and evil. Instead he advocated rejecting the system of apartheid without demonizing the beneficiaries. Far from compromising principles, Mandela led the way to seek out the shared ‘humanity’ between ruler and ruled from which Islamic jihadists could learn lessons for peaceful co-existence. Second, Mandela demonstrated cool, rational calculation without being manipulative. He understood that the state had enough power and control to hold out for some time despite the irritation of sanctions. He always revealed this pragmatic sense of reality. For example, when he was asked during the treason trial by Judge Bekker whether he would consider anything less than one man one vote, he replied: “Well, you know, I can’t speak for the organization. But make us an offer, you know, and we’ll consider it” (Bowman, 2009:82).

BUILDING NATIONAL COHESION

Mandela understood that regardless of what happened and how the struggle developed, eventually oppressor and oppressed would have to live together in one integrated society, adversaries to be sure, but also interdependent citizens. This vision explains why he sought ways to bridge the cultural divide between both not only by learning Afrikaans but by exploring Afrikaner history as much as he could. He understood the importance of recognition and acceptance to initiate and break down the fear of the unknown other and the healing role of sport. With this simple symbolic gesture he had succeeded in liberating many white people from fear and motivated them to embrace the new order.

Mandela valued deeply the importance of a unifying citizenship in post-apartheid South Africa, beyond the narrow focus of state prescribed ideals of rights and duties. He particularly courted and cajoled the hostile and suspicious Afrikaner community. He used symbolically charged gestures, such as wearing the Springbok rugby tricot to a major game at Newlands. He wanted to express formal identification with what
is considered a predominantly Afrikaner sport, handing the captain of the victorious home team Roosevelt’s famous 1912 speech, “Citizenship in a Republic”. After that event the old Boer flag which the spectators had waved previously faded like magic. Most of the delirious rugby fans now showed the new South Africa flag. Mandela even visited the widow of the architect of Apartheid, the 90-year-old Betty Verwoerd, for tea and koeksisters, an Afrikaner sweet delicacy. The prison warden who guarded him was included as a special guest to his Presidential inauguration. Those acts of symbolic reconciliation deeply impacted perceptions of belonging. They served to bridge gaps of race, class and culture with the aim of building a cohesive, inclusive new society. Van Robbroeck’s (2014) analysis of the visual translation of his *Long Walk to Freedom*, demonstrated through these connections how he reconciled apparently irreconcilable binaries, the rural-urban, traditional-modern and communitarian-individualistic in the South African cultural landscape. Ethnic recognition was a highly contested concept given the history of separate development and the apartheid regime’s use of ethnic identity to divide and rule. The entire ANC policy was based on a de-emphasis of ‘difference’, rejection of ‘tribalism’, to be replaced by a unifying non-racialism in the building of a common society. Like trying to reconcile Afrikaners with the ANC, Mandela took even greater political risks by advocating the same with Mangosutho Buthelezi’s Inkatha movement. At the time of Mandela’s release, ANC militants, particularly in Natal, were involved in a violent struggle with Inkatha members. Buthelezi was considered a collaborator with a ‘Third Force’, shadowy mercenaries of right-wing forces to destabilize and discredit the emerging new order. Several thousand on both sides had been assassinated, thrown off trains or killed in migrant hostels in townships on the Rand. Despite opposition in his own organization Mandela met Buthelezi and later addressed a mass rally in Natal where he advocated “throw your pangas into the sea”. Several hundred walked out in protest, but Mandela persisted and eventually succeeded with the help of civil society organisations and clergy in bringing Inkatha to participate in the first democratic election.

Mandela was able to balance a pride in origin and roots without upsetting the unity with others of different origins. He was proud of his roots in Qunu, but not enveloped by them to the exclusion of others. His was an enviable life of comfortable connections with people from all linguistic and ethnic groups, local, South African, Africa wide and global. Yet we need to remind ourselves that the non-racialism which was ultimately to be his hallmark contribution was to evolve out of various struggles. For instance, it was preceded by distancing himself from interracial collaboration with Indians. Tom Lodge (2006:43) points out that in 1949, Mandela “as an officeholder in the Transvaal ANC, rejected an appeal from Ahmed Kathrada that he should sign a joint statement with Indian Congress leaders on the recent Indian African riots in Durban, arguing that the ANC should condemn such hostilities on its own.” Mandela accused Sisulu of having sold out to Indians. He was convinced “that calls for political cooperation with ‘Indian shopkeepers and merchants’ would engender opposition among most Africans whom, he believed, viewed the Asian
community as exploitative” (Lodge, 2006:45). He upheld this position favouring separate organizational participation well into 1951. Who would have guessed that the very individuals whom he once censored for challenging him on this position, such as Kathrada and Cachalia, were to become his closest comrades years later. Much of this shift was due to early exposure to the internationalism of the (then mainly white) Communist Party and its Marxism (Bowron, 2009:36, 41; Lodge, 2006:32, 48–50). He was impressed with the genuineness and ease with which cross-racial social encounters took place in the closed circle of selfless activists like Braam Fisher, Beyers Naude and the accused in the Treason Trial. The brief spell of refusing to collaborate with Indians was to change exponentially as he came to know them personally as fellow university students, legal colleagues and comrades who revised his political stance. All this illustrates his ability to transform the ‘fear of the other’ which plays out so much in different ways in the South African political landscape even to this day.

This period of Mandela’s life which differs so markedly from his later all-embracing humanistic years, highlights the importance of personal growth which comes from being able to rethink a position held under different circumstances. It reveals the immense value of having one’s biases re-examined, transformed and transcended.

AUTOCRATIC OR DEMOCRATIC DECISION-MAKING

Leaders often differ in their articulation of principles and the reality of their practices. Mandela has been widely praised for his unyielding support of constitutional democracy and the rule of law. Yet his tolerance of dissent was not always what one would expect of someone who praised the traditional ways of listening to all voices and arriving at a consensual position. Pallo Jordan, a member of the first post-apartheid cabinet, reports that Mandela’s approach to solving dissent within the Congress or in the Cabinet was “why don’t we solve these problems the way we used to solve problems on the island? … Don’t let’s debate this matter in public, let’s go and caucus it somewhere” (Bowron, 2009:298). When Jordan disagreed with this approach and on some issues of civil liberties, an autocratic Mandela was not to be moved and prior to firing him from the Cabinet, invited him to breakfast, ending with: “You know, I’ll give you this friendly warning: in the national executive committee of the ANC you are there because the membership elect you, but in cabinet you are there because I put you there. I just want to remind you of that” (Bowron, 2009:299).

A much more consequential autocratic decision was the abandoning of the Freedom Charter’s promised nationalization in favour of the embrace of neo-liberal market policies. Without Mandela’s strong support and closure of the internal debate, after he returned from a World Economic Forum meeting in Davos with global corporatism, this decisive switch would not have gone down so smoothly. Yet at the same time the leader always emphasized that he subjects himself to collective
decision-making, when he should have intervened, for example on the question of Zimbabwe.

Keeping an open mind on politically contested issues and being prepared to change one’s position on the basis of new information, avoids ideological dogmatism which results in a blindness to opportunities for change. From this standpoint, history is always open ended and most developments are not predetermined and inevitable. Mandela displayed the rare capacity for introspection to the extent of self-deprecation. He admitted being “appalled by the pedantry, artificiality and lack of originality” (Mandela, 2011:45) of his early writings. Humility shines through the confession that he once “was backward politically” (p. 43), but by implication, that determined self-teaching could reverse ignorance. Although he had more than enough reason for self-pity, Mandela never wallowed in victimhood, but stressed agency. The prisoner rejected his own liberation offered when acceptance of release (to the Transkei or by renouncing violence) could compromise political principles. An acute sense of reality inveighs against grandstanding and posturing. Instead of empowering a revolutionary organisation it could lead to delusions about the adversary and wishful thinking. An illegitimate regime is not necessarily an unstable one. This insight requires being flexible and dispassionate enough to peruse the logic of one’s adversary and to utilize the cleavages and contradictions within that group. Cultivating the ability to seek out the shared interests between adversaries and establishing common ground so that both sides experience change as advantageous, underlay the ingenious negotiating of the peaceful transformation. Mandela foremost defined leadership as the art to compromise.

Equality of opportunity, with the hope of ensuing emancipatory effects for all, was a prevalent theme throughout Mandela’s philosophy. Yet, decades after his release from prison, similar patterns of educational outcomes reminiscent of the past, persist along racial lines. There are personal lessons which can be drawn from Mandela’s approach to learning and life in general. He cultivated intuitively, what psychologists refer to as a “growth mindset” (Dweck, 2016) thriving on challenges, avoiding victimization, and turning challenges and failures into opportunities. In our schools we too rarely teach with a growth mindset or help students turn around failure and see opportunities for change. Schools that are segregated racially or economically with regard to resources, or educational practices that track or stream curriculum on the basis of perceived ability differences, serve to stereotype students in ways that fail to engage them as equal citizens. The teaching of agency is often reserved for some students, not others, and the focus on competition rather than cooperation does not equip youth for compromise and a commitment to the common good. Rhona Weinstein, in her book Reaching Higher: the Power of Expectations in Schooling (2016), refers to two different achievement cultures, one that selects talent (looking for the most qualified, usually those with high status attributes) versus the one that develops the talent of all. The latter was the goal toward which Mandela was dedicated and the philosophy and organization of our schools ought to mirror this.
Mandela utilized critical self-reflection on many levels, mainly to transform praxis. He valued critical feedback and encouraged knowledge of contrary perceptions to be probed. One such example occurred toward the end of his presidency, as Martin Hall (2009) recalls an encounter in 1999. Mandela invited the Vice Chancellor and 20 faculty members from the University of Cape Town to a frank discussion of the successes and failures during his time in office. During a three hour session the issues raised and commented upon, included economic policy, reconciliation, and the then epidemic development of HIV and AIDS in the country, which he had not addressed until quite late. With this session Mandela not only demonstrated his respect for research and informed criticism, but also the value of team-work and consensual decision making by recognizing adversarial opinions.

ADHERENCE TO PRINCIPLES UNDER CONFORMITY PRESSURE

Firm adherence to universal ethical principles, to human rights and constitutional law in the face of opportunistic peer pressure to the contrary, probably stand out as Mandela’s most important pedagogical legacy. Three examples demonstrate the moral high ground Mandela held, despite conformity pressure. (1) His steadfast support of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) flew in the face of his successor’s criticism that the TRC had criminalized the liberation struggle by equalizing ANC violations in a just struggle with the atrocities of an unjust Apartheid regime. Mandela firmly supported the widely accepted distinction between a *just war* and *justice in war*. Like Desmond Tutu and the TRC argued, even in a just war, certain avoidable actions, like killing of civilians or prisoners, constitute injustice. (2) Mandela spoke out against the abuses of the Mugabe regime when the ANC government avoided public criticism or even supported Zimbabwe, because Mugabe was popular among black South Africans and government figures benefitted from the alliance. Likewise, Mandela abandoned his initial ‘quiet diplomacy’ on Nigeria, after the hanging of Saro-Wiwa and the Ogoni eight by the military Abacha regime in 1995. However, he failed in his advocacy of an oil boycott at home and abroad, because Shell and Anglo/US global interests would not support it. (3) Mandela’s moral leadership and civil courage is most clearly demonstrated in his opposition to Mbeki’s then-prevailing HIV/AIDS denialism. One wishes that other ANC executives had followed Mandela’s lead and he himself had broken more often with his self-imposed ‘organisational discipline’ instead of submitting to a deadly lunacy. As the editor of the Sunday Times, Mondi Makhanya, recalls an event at the time of Mbeki’s dismissal:

Mbeki will not be missed. On hearing these comments my mind raced back to 2001 when Mbeki summoned Nelson Mandela to a national executive meeting for a dressing down. Mandela’s sin was that he had become increasingly vocal on issues of HIV/AIDS, warning in his utterances that the disease would claim more lives than World War I and World War II combined if we did not treat it as the emergency it was. At this time Mbeki was at the peak of his Aids
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denialism and saw Mandela’s entry into the debate as a personal affront. The then 83-year-old Mandela was summoned to be put in his place. One after the other, Mbeki’s Rottweilers sank their teeth into the world’s greatest statesman. They humiliated him and made him feel tiny. A shameful display of power. Those with a conscience sat there silently as the ugly fest was going on. (Sunday Times, September 28, 2008)

Nowadays Mandela is humiliated again by being called a ‘sell-out’ by a militant minority despite his approach to reconciliation preventing the destruction of the country in a civil war like Syria. If students learn the lessons about compromise in democracies, non-violence and principled moral leadership, historical heroes like Mandela, Gandhi or Martin Luther King have nevertheless triumphed.

The legacy of this complex figure will live on, idealized by most and reviled by few, hopefully to be dissected in all his virtues and flaws by politically literate analysts. After all, it was Mandela who massively contributed to a new South Africa emerging peacefully during a crucial historical moment, by persuading his own sceptical movement while pacifying and marginalizing a white right-wing threat to the change of political power. That the “Imagined Liberation” (Adam & Moodley, 2015) has faded and floundered in the current South Africa is not Mandela’s shortcoming. His vision and legacy reminds us to revive it.

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