



Vignette 1

Learning from the past: The role of emotion in deflecting conversations about privilege and power in South African schools

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Abstract

This vignette explores history teaching in a 9th grade classroom of a high school with a population mostly representing the privileged White minority population in South Africa. An experienced teacher takes the initiative, deviating from the curriculum, in trying to teach his students about racism and discrimination and the roles played by love and hate. Ultimately the vignette unveils how the deep injustices of the South African past still permeate all aspects of schooling and especially the history classroom, rendering ‘citizenship’ a difficult concept on the national level before even considering the global.

The bright African prints of Mr. Cilliers’ rolled up shirts are a welcome splash of color in a school of pristine white walls and colonnades. “Actually not African,” he reminds me, ever the history teacher; “the shwe shwe fabric was originally imported from Indonesia during the slave trade.” He had once shouted this at a Black activist in a supermarket after being accused of cultural appropriation, followed by the ace up his sleeve: “I was fighting apartheid before you were even born!”

African or not, to me the shirts represented Mr. Cilliers’ liminal position within Southgate High. His history with the prestigious institution was deep and personal; the late Mrs. Cilliers had been the boarding matron here, and both of their children had passed through its doors. He had watched as the school transformed from an

entirely White student body, to an only almost-entirely White student body, despite management attempts to keep ‘standards’ largely the same. He had, at every opportunity, tried to expand the horizons of his students – exposing them to protest music; inviting anti-apartheid activists to speak; and plastering the walls of his classroom with posters of Gandhi, Mandela, and John Lennon.

Yet nearing retirement, and with the recent passing of his wife, Mr. Cilliers was no longer playing by the rules. His commitment had somehow become re-orientated towards the students, and only the students; he was no longer invested in either the curriculum or the school as an institution. His teaching had become playful, but also personal, urgent, and profound; “What is the point of all those people dying,” he once asked my bewildered husband, “if our students don’t learn from the mistakes of the past?”

Learning from the mistakes of the past. But whose mistakes? Which past? And what should we learn? These are uncomfortable questions for a country like South Africa, and in particular for the privileged White minority population that Southgate High represents. The approach which Mr. Cilliers adopts in many ways reflects what we have often thought of as good Global Citizenship Education: a strong focus on human rights, democracy, and treating each other as equals. Yet, as the following vignette explores, this may be an insufficient framework to meet the demands of Global Citizenship in a world of growing structural injustice.

“Good morning grade 9. Before you sit down, I want each of you to name one human right. Alex, you go first.” Human rights are central to Mr. Cilliers’ teaching. He spends the entire first term with his grade 9 history class discussing children’s rights, how they have developed both in Europe and their native South Africa, and how they relate to concepts of citizenship. These rights, Mr. Cilliers posits, are essential to understanding both the Holocaust and apartheid – the two big topics the class will cover this year – and how they relate to each other.

His focus on human rights and citizenship is accompanied by a third theme: the notion of belonging. Belonging has gained particular resonance in this school in recent months. Following accusations of a racist culture which makes the minority non-White students feel like they don’t belong, the school management has organized a series of day-long workshops. These workshops – facilitated by experts at great expense – allow staff and students to reflect on what it means to be part of this school. However, despite being warmly welcomed into Southgate High, they are out of bounds to me: “Better keep it internal,” the headmaster cautions, no doubt wary of more negative media headlines.

As my disappointment wanes it is replaced by amusement at the flurry of moral panic and existential insecurity that the word ‘racist’ has evoked. “How long must we keep apologizing for?” vents the geography teacher aloud in the staffroom. She has unwittingly touched upon what no one has yet dared to articulate: that this is still a part of apartheid’s legacy, and that ‘we’ might still have something to apologize for. Twenty-five years into democracy, is Southgate High finally reckoning with the implications of the past?

Yes and no. Unlike his colleagues, Mr. Cilliers is excited by these workshops. This is not – as I had anticipated – for their potential to reflect on South Africa’s difficult history, but rather as an opportunity to link notions of exclusion to less contentious and more abstract ideas of human rights and citizenship. By concentrating on these global and theoretical concepts he neatly leapfrogs the uncomfortable specifics of the apartheid history in his own backyard.

The day after the workshop Mr. Cilliers devotes an entire class to reflection on how his students felt about the discussions. They focus particularly on how bad it feels to be discriminated against, and this bad feeling becomes a touchstone for understanding discrimination and human rights abuses throughout both the Holocaust and apartheid. When the students interview someone who was alive during apartheid, Mr. Cilliers encourages his class to ask how their interviewees felt at that time. When the students report back on their interviews, Mr. Cilliers asks them how they themselves felt when hearing this testimony. After one interview a Black student observes that her grandmother who was forcibly removed from a wealthy ‘White’ area to an impoverished ‘Black’ area in the 1950s still lives in that ‘Black’ area today. “What a fantastic example of the structural legacy of apartheid,” I think, “and the ways in which racial segregation and inequality are still perpetuated!” Mr. Cilliers doesn’t share my enthusiasm. Instead he deflects from conversations of apartheid’s structural legacy to ask, “And how do you feel about that?” “Sad,” the student replies.

During a lesson on the rise of Hitler, students were asked how it would feel to belong to the ‘master race.’ During a lesson on Kristallnacht, students were asked how it would feel to be a Jew watching the synagogues burn. Sometimes Mr. Cilliers goes around the class, giving every student the opportunity to say how they feel, while at other times students are encouraged to write their feelings down in their notebooks. The frequent comparison of these two histories – the Holocaust and apartheid – begins to blur their important structural differences, and together the class expands the frame of reference until only abstract similarities between the Holocaust and apartheid remain: the bad feelings, which caused people to do bad things, which caused more bad feelings.

One afternoon, with sun streaming through the large oak sash windows, Mr. Cilliers asks his students to sit in pairs, each with a pen and paper. “I want you to

take two minutes,” he says, “and write down everything you admire about the person sitting next to you.” There are giggles from the class as they begin writing. “Now I want you to give what you’ve written to your partner. You have a minute to read it and on the back of the paper I want you to write down how you felt when you read it.” The students go one by one, and describe how they felt; “happy,” “loved,” “understood,” “special.” I sit at the back of the class, smiling with the excitement the activity has generated, but also wondering where this is going.

“The Holocaust is filled with hate,” Mr. Cilliers begins. “It is filled with extreme hate. Hate is so intense that people suspend their morals and end up murdering close to 15 million people and think that is OK. So, there were two reasons why I gave you that. It’s difficult to like someone if you don’t like yourself. So, I wanted you to see all the good qualities about yourself, so that you can identify those qualities in someone else.” He picks up a sheet from a girl’s desk. “There’s nothing better than getting something like this. I wanted you to feel good about yourself because it’s interesting to see how hate can lead to death.”

‘Love,’ ‘belonging,’ ‘human rights,’ ‘citizenship’ – according to Mr. Cilliers there was a direct line connecting these ideas. Apartheid was a lack of love. The Holocaust was a lack of love. Racial exclusion in the school corridors or on the hockey pitch was a lack of love. “All you need is love,” I found myself humming. It was a compelling idea, and one which delighted the class. “The problem with South Africa,” one student told me, “is that people don’t treat each other kindly.” “Yes,” his friend beamed, “we need to be kind to everyone, and I’ve never been racist in my life!”

Yet these warm and fuzzy interactions left me cold. I had visions of Mr. Cilliers picking his way through a moral minefield, using the framework of ‘feelings’ to successfully avoid any difficult conversations that would force his students to confront the legacy of the past. We followed Mr. Cilliers’ trail of logic and ended in a place where South Africa’s structural inequality could be solved with inter-personal kindness; where ‘belonging’ – in a school that is structurally exclusive – could be solved with love; where the legacy of apartheid could be solved through not making anyone feel bad. I marveled at the students’ enthusiasm for change, and their belief that a new South Africa was possible, all the while ignoring the elephant in the room: that the structural legacy of apartheid still remains, even when the hate that caused apartheid has gone.

And what of the hate caused by apartheid? “Get over it,” was the students’ response, as they complained about the lack of forgiveness in South Africa. “Black people will often try to take back what was once theirs, rather than like – you know – move forward,” explained a student; “it kind of bothers me, because I’ve never had a problem with race.” Indeed, any efforts to address structural inequalities – land reform, Black Economic Empowerment, affirmative action – were treated as affronts

to the mantra of not making people feel bad. Feeling bad as a victim of historical injustice was allowed, but being made to feel bad as a beneficiary of historical injustice was not. “Learning from the past does not mean trying to repeat it in reverse!” was the adamant cry, and indeed this was logically consistent – if the problem with apartheid was bad feelings, then the solution to apartheid cannot be more bad feelings.

South Africa is a society of heart-breaking inequalities, and communities characterized by extreme levels of racialized poverty and anger. It struggles, as a nation, to make sense of past abuses and the contemporary legacy of those abuses. In this context, what does it mean to be a Global Citizen?

Despite the human rights approach that characterized Mr. Cilliers’ teaching, I came to suspect that this was not what good Global Citizenship Education looked like. Students were taught about abuses in the past, but not how to link them to the present. They were taught to put themselves in the shoes of a Jew in Nazi Germany, but not a South African in the township down the road. They were taught to feel strongly about injustice rather than identify their responsibilities to it.

On the last day of term, however, the mirage of a history safely in the past was dissolved by a simple question; “Sir, if D.F. Malan was the architect of apartheid, then why is there a school in Cape Town still named after him?”

Despite Mr. Cilliers’ attempt to deflect the question by speaking about the bureaucracy of choosing school names, this student persisted; “I don’t think it should be allowed. I think it would be disgraceful” – she whispered intensely – “for a Colored person like to me attend a school with a name like that.” She spat the last words out as though they disgusted her.

A cry of both support and indignation ran through the classroom and a dozen hands shot up. Students began to shout, “it’s just a name, it doesn’t matter!”, “it makes people feel uncomfortable, it shouldn’t be allowed,” “it has nothing to do with legacy, he was just a person.” Quickly the discussion spiraled out of control. Most concerningly however, a racial divide started to emerge which Mr. Cilliers was ill-equipped to manage.

These students had discussed harrowing historical atrocities with calm. However, the accusation that something was morally questionable in the present as a result of something that happened in the past was deeply controversial. A class previously so amicable became upset and angry. There was deep hurt and mistrust lurking just beneath the surface.

I reflected on this incident for a long time. I felt greater empathy for Mr. Cilliers’ approach which avoided such divisive discussions, and which maintained the calm

and amicable exterior. Perhaps this was all that could be expected for now. But the incident also made me reflect that the larger question of Global Citizenship Education may need to be reframed. Indeed, what does it mean to be a Global Citizen when we haven't yet learned to be a national one?