

# Race, Transformation, and Education as Contradictions in a Neoliberal South Africa

By Isha Dilraj | Peer Review



## Abstract

In navigating the complexities of race and inequality in South African society, shadowed by colonialism and apartheid, the term transformation has gained traction as the mantra for growth, retribution, education reform, and economic and societal prosperity. However, the capitalistic and neoliberal environment within which the country operates has resulted in transformation initiatives becoming an obsolete contradiction. The education arena, in particular, exemplifies this contradiction and the plethora of inequalities still prevalent in society today. Race has been, and still is, at the forefront of understanding societal inequalities and socio-economic challenges, even though it doesn't operate in isolation, and relies on the chaotic politics of intersectionality to reveal how power operates in ways which occlude and disguise different kinds of inequalities. In this article, I focus on race as a construct and its deep-rooted significance in

South African society, by dissecting conceptualisations of race as a signifier and symbolic, as a structure of division and marker of exclusion, and as a construct of power. Presenting these conceptualisations of race sets the foundation for understanding why transformation initiatives became focal and imperative in charting a new, democratic course in the country. However, these initiatives have become blatant contradictions, as exemplified in the Covid-19 moment in relation to the education sector and the return of students to schools, highlighting deep-rooted inequalities. In acknowledging the severe plight of South African society, handicapped by a superfluity of disparities and discrimination, an offer of hope to reimagine society is deliberated as a way forward, by analysing concepts of antiracism, decoloniality, and a turn to re-defining transformation initiatives to free society from the captivity of neoliberal mentality.

## Introduction

The dynamic environment within which our world exists is rife with complexities which perpetuate inequality, injustice, corruption, power, poverty, and racism. Societies, therefore, place value on principles of freedom and human dignity, and a political agenda which propagates such becomes adopted as a believed benefit and remedy to the growing ills of the world. At this juncture, theories of neoliberalism emanate as the 'perceived' holy grail to combat the aforementioned tribulations, in allowing for economic progress in a globalised world. The reality, however, is far more complex and convoluted. Neoliberalism, adopted in an attempt to redefine the world from the mid-1970s onwards, is a right-wing propaganda founded on ideas of freedom and the individual, the promotion of privatisation, free markets, and trade. However, in practice, neoliberalism seeks to commodify our world and its people, and consequently serves the interest of the elite class of capitalists in further promoting the economic prosperity of a miniscule group in society, thereby threatening the transformation initiatives required to eradicate poverty, inequality, and racism in the majority of the world – South Africa being no exception. Freedom is never free – it always comes with a hidden price and, sometimes, that burden becomes too heavy as it is carried by the poor and disadvantaged in society, who are already crippled by a legacy of marginalisation and deprivation.

In the wake of Covid-19, a worldwide pandemic which has changed the functioning of the world as we know it, which has halted economies and threatened job security, which has redefined borders and re-emphasised technology, which has torn apart families and loved ones, and endangered livelihoods and survival, we have been rendered defenceless and our vulnerabilities have been exposed. We are forced to reconsider what our idea of 'normalcy' entails, and question whether the world order, as we know it, is truly based on equity, equality, and justice. One thing is evident: a spotlight has been shone on the blatant contradictions of society and the illusion of transformation. Our world and, in particular, our country, displays the paradox of society in encompassing, on the one hand, privilege in all its whitewashed layers and, on the other, the extremities of poverty, social inequality, and racial injustices which have been entrenched into society for years,

---

“ One such arena which aptly illustrates this contradiction, and displays the nuances of race and inequality, is that of education. For years, one of the focal points for democratic change in post-apartheid South Africa has been to provide greater access to education for the large majority of the population who previously could not readily access either education or skilled work ”

---

thereby rendering a host of transformation initiatives unsuccessful. These inequalities have existed prior to this moment, but the neoliberal world in which South Africa operates has provided Covid-19 with an opportunity to further exacerbate and deepen them.

One such arena which aptly illustrates this contradiction, and displays the nuances of race and inequality, is that of education. For years, one of the focal points for democratic change in post-apartheid South Africa has been to provide greater access to education for the large majority of the population who previously could not readily access either education or skilled work (Mandela, 2003). The scars of apartheid and colonial rule are so deeply entrenched in our society that even today, 26 years post-democracy, the effects still linger in terms of racial inequalities which are prevalent in the schooling and post-schooling systems. Over the years, South Africa has witnessed the deepening of the socio-economic divide and the aim for greater access to education not being actualised. The reason for this could be (arguably) attributed to the neoliberal context in which the country has found itself to exist: borrowing from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, the subsequent Structural Adjustment Policies, increased privatisation, and the commodification of education and humans as capital are but a few of the instances which hamper transformation (Connell and Dados, 2014: 119). Furthermore, Covid-19 (operating within the neoliberal context) has served as a marker to further highlight how damning the social inequalities are and how race is still very much at the forefront of understanding societal inequalities and

socio-economic challenges. It must be noted that, in this article, race is selected as the primary focus, but it is imperative to acknowledge that race does not operate in isolation – the intersectional nature of race, class, gender, etc. is crucial in trying to make sense of the complexity of neoliberalism. The chaotic politics of intersectionality brings to the fore how power operates in ways which occlude and disguise different kinds of inequalities.

Imperative to unpacking the issues prevalent in the education terrain in South Africa, is a robust understanding of neoliberalism, its imprint on the world and its effects in the South African context, and how this has allowed race to be enacted in particular ways by delving into the intricacies of how race is woven into the lived realities of all, via a haunted past of colonial rule and apartheid. Navigating these conceptualisations of race as a foundation to exploring and coxswaining the various necessities and attempts at transformation, the article uses the current landscape of the South African schooling and education terrain, particularly in the light of Covid-19, as an exemplification of how inequalities are still heavily embedded in institutional arrangements and the blatant contradictions of transformation.

In acknowledging that South Africa (and the majority of the world) operates in a market-economy-driven neoliberal world, writers like Arundhati Roy offer insightful provocations: 'Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next' (2020). Consideration should, therefore, be given to alternate thoughts to charter a new course in the direction of 'reimagining' our future – a turn towards anti-racism, decoloniality, and re-defining transformation in an honest, practical, and unpretentious reconciliation, whereby the complexities of the neoliberal grip are understood and teased out, but at the same time, allowing new possibilities to emerge as we forge forward.

### **Briefly navigating neoliberalism**

Neoliberalism in its ubiquitous complexities may be succinctly summarised in the words of David Harvey as: 'a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional

framework characterised by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade' (2005: 2). Following the trajectory of neoliberalism, its roots can be traced back to the fall of fascist regimes in the mid-1970s and a response to the supposed failed Keynesian programme. From thinkers like P.T. Bauer, Friedrich von Hayek, and Milton (to name a few), to the introduction of neoliberal ideas in Chile and Iraq in the 1970s, from the Mont Pelerin Society, to the Thatcher and Reagan administrations, and the successive worldwide spread of neoliberal principles and agendas, either via independent country adoption or via Structural Adjustment Programme requirements (instituted in countries who borrow from the IMF and the World Bank), the neoliberal agenda forged through and became the dominant world order of the 21st century (Harvey, 2005; Connell and Dados, 2014).

Essentially, neoliberalism has become a hegemonic power which attempts to redefine the world order from public to private, from fair/free to commoditised, and is arguably the latest phase of capitalism (Connell and Davos, 2014). In prioritising economic value above all else and assigning human beings as capital to produce wealth in the economy (Livingstone, 1997), this system has perpetuated the inequalities from the remnants of apartheid and colonial rule in South Africa. From the mid-1990s, the South African newly elected democratic government swiftly aligned its policy agenda to neoliberal agendas in focusing on 'free market, privatisation, globalisation, reduction of government spending, repayment of apartheid debt, cutting corporate taxes, and cutting social programs' (Kgatle, 2020: 3). These prioritisations, unfortunately, sacrificed the reform that was needed socially in the country in order to address racism, inequalities, and poverty. Clarno described neoliberalism in the South African context as a system that 'denies the continued significance of racism and enables assaults on corrective policies such as welfare, affirmative action and land redistribution' (2017: 12). Instead of focusing on policies which benefited the majority in the restructuring of a just society, neoliberalism instituted a sense of individualism that resulted in the prosperity of a small group, thereby producing an elite Black class, leaving behind the majority of previously disadvantaged groups in states of poverty, inequality, and underdevelopment.

These issues have existed in South African society since the inception of democracy (and prior to it); however, against the backdrop of neoliberalism, Covid-19 has reiterated and exacerbated the multifarious concerns pertaining to how racism is enacted in particular spaces and how transformation initiatives are depicted as blatant contradictions, particularly in the education terrain.

### Traversing race

For centuries, the term race has been used to grapple with, and understand, the functioning of human interrelations, inter alia political, socio-economical, and sociological. We have pondered, theorised, analysed, inscribed, and transcribed. Race exists as much in the physical world as it exists in each person, and is torturously interwoven into the way the world operates, how people interact, and what shapes dialogues, policies, and practices. In the South African landscape, race plays out a particular narrative that is entrenched in the aftermath of oppression and the symbolic (and physical) weaponisation of its use from apartheid and colonial rule. This has been further influenced by the neoliberal society in which we operate, which has not allowed the emotional (historical) dimensions of race to be dealt with. Race as a construct is a multi-dimensional term heavily loaded with the burden of history, with the pain of it being weaponised, and with an attribution of various symbolic representations. It has become a variable of analysis, and holds in its construction a hope for rectification, retribution, and transformation. Understanding the multifarious epistemic nature, history, and connotations of the term 'race' is both complex and comprehensive, and intertwined into the histories of the world (in this instance, South Africa). Various understandings and conceptualisations of race have emerged over the years, and as with other social constructs (i.e. gender, sexuality, and class), race opens a narrative regarding discourses of power, inclusion, exclusion, discrimination, oppression, privilege, and transformation – all imperative in unpacking the complexities surrounding the conceptualisation of race. The following three sections – (i) race as both a signifier and symbolic, (ii) race as a structure of division and marker of exclusion, and (iii) race as a construct of power – offer a framework for delving into the conceptualisation of race as a construct.

### Race as both a signifier and symbolic

Over the years, in South African society, the social reality of race has become irremovable from our identities. It has become, in the words of Crain Soudien, 'a master signifier', as a means of explaining everyday life, as well as providing an understanding of deep philosophical and enigmatic occurrences (2012: 6). Race, as a signifier (the physical form a word, term, or concept takes on), allows for us to gain a deeper perspective of the complexities in navigating our identities. Apartheid, shadowed by colonial rule, instilled in both society and the self the belief that race is a defining human characteristic that holds the utmost importance in the organisation of society.

Another intriguing idea is one of race as the preservation of privilege. Since the inception of race as a signifier, a means to define difference, it has exhibited symbolic properties: the arbitrary distinction of individuals based on the colour of their skin, then precipitously designated ideas of superiority and inferiority as a means to maintain privilege, to separate, and to dominate. Whiteness became associated with superiority, privilege, and status, while blackness – or anything non-white – became associated with inferiority, mediocrity, and unworthiness. These ideas, instilled into the fabric of human make-up and entrenched via institutionalised practices, ensured that race became an inextricable part of the mosaic of every South African's identity, and is the reason we have become so accustomed to reading our world and understanding our reality through the lens of race. We have normalised associating race with our definable identity – as a descriptor in social interactions, on various application forms and, most importantly and curiously, as an intrinsic identity for ourselves. Why have we become so complacent in accepting the realities played out by the designation of race? Why is it that we still view race as an imperative signifier in social relations and settings, in understanding our individual and national identities, and in political and organisational deliberations and functioning? An attempt at demystifying this lies in the idea of race as symbolic.

The challenge in defining race as symbolic is that the symbolism it holds for various groups of people is different across the board, based on each individual's history, experience with race, thought-process, and

lived reality. Written from my positionality as an 'Indian, South African woman' (the irony of this identification does not surpass me, but rather aptly exemplifies the importance of race as a signifier), race as symbolic holds particular significance in how my identity has been shaped and presented. For me, and for many people of colour in South Africa, conceptualising race as symbolic is significant in terms of a vast array of circumstances. Race is symbolic as it represents one's historic diaspora – where one comes from, what one has been through – and holds substance for where one still needs to go. It clutches importance as a mark of what one has endured, what one has grown through and overcome, and represents what one has now achieved (even if much more remains to be charted). It is a reminder that one's history (and that of one's family) is so rooted in racial identity and a fight for democracy. It is even more so a symbol of injustice, oppression, and pain; of difficulties and unwarranted endurance; and of all that was superficial and indecorous. At the same time, it is a symbol of a new dawn, one's untiring spirit in the fight for change and transformation, and a pride for having walked decades indefatigably. Race as a signifier/symbolic helps one understand why race is ever-present in oneself, one's identity, and one's interactions. It is a reminder of why one needs to continue to use race as a signifier to quantify progress, to rectify, and to transform.

### **Race as a structure of division and marker of exclusion**

In understanding the symbolic nature of race and its role as a signifier, a deviation down a historical lane is necessary to understand how race was weaponised and why race held, and holds, the significance it does in South Africans' identities. Colonial rule and the apartheid regime left South Africa a canvas of tainted paintwork, drenched in morose colours of division and exclusion. The institutionalising of laws and behaviours, which divided the nation by excluding people of colour (designated as Black, Indian, and Coloured), meant that race was used as a structure of division and a marker of exclusion. In dividing people on the basis of race in separating where they lived, which facilities they could use, which schools they attended, what level of education they could be accepted into, what jobs and income they could be restricted to, and many other oppressive and dehumanising practices, the apartheid government sought to devalue and

---

“ In understanding the symbolic nature of race and its role as a signifier, a deviation down a historical lane is necessary to understand how race was weaponised and why race held, and holds, the significance it does in South Africans' identities. ”

---

undermine people of colour by breaking their spirits and controlling their lives. These deep-rooted wounds left unimaginable scars on the South African people and the make-up of society, so much so that post-1994 the stain filtered through, marring the rainbow nation that the newly-elected democratic government tried so desperately to create, but were unable to, in the wake of the neoliberal world in which it operated.

The entire underpinning of apartheid rested on the ideas of inclusion and exclusion: white equalled good and valued, which meant inclusion, and non-white equalled subpar and inferior, which demarcated exclusion. Therefore, in order to confront the years of social exclusion based on race, it necessitated that the newly-elected democratic government sought to acknowledge, rectify, and instil representation and justice by instituting policies of 'inclusion' for all previously disadvantaged groups. (Note, the article does not aim to delve into the various government strategies that attempted rectification and transformation, which naturally encompassed policies rooted in inclusion. It merely notes these attempts as an exemplification to the construct of race as a structure of division and marker of exclusion.)

The stark reality, however, is that inclusion begets exclusion and vice-versa. In including a particular group of people, another group is automatically excluded. This is not to demerit the necessity of 'inclusion' and the substantive reasoning behind its requirement; however, theorising ideas of inclusion can become controversial in the ways it positions extremities embedded in the historical contexts of South Africa, and in how it approaches these in efforts to bring about change. Racial segregation, exclusionary laws, physical separation, deliberate denigration, and violent oppression are particularly difficult historical constructs to 'redress' in a neoliberal,

global environment where external pressures and internal hegemonic forces constantly 'push back' at transformational efforts. This is most evident in the ways 'race as a construct' has been addressed 'in relation to questions of domination and subjugation, inclusion and exclusion, and the creating of new social hierarchies' (Soudien and Sayed, 2004: 102). Therefore, the debate cannot simply be about who to include, how many to include, where to include, or what mechanisms are required to achieve this (Soudien and Sayed, 2004: 106). Rather, the debate needs to be considered within larger social justice concerns in terms of why particular groups need to be included and how to facilitate their inclusion, and what the moral imperatives and implications are for the exclusion or deliberate disadvantaging of others. It can be argued that, as long as these considerations are built on social justice goals and do not perpetuate inequalities and lead to new forms of racialisation, inclusion approaches and policies can justifiably choose or privilege certain groups (if in the best interests of society) (Soudien and Sayed, 2004). On the other hand, inclusion – written in political ways to privilege certain groups – may generate new logics for exclusion that could have dire consequences for future processes, thus reinstating that race as a construct will almost always encompass ideas of it being a structure of division and a marker of exclusion.

### **Race as a construct of power**

This notion sparks another final thought pertaining to the construct of race in identifying the ideological aspect of how race plays out a significant role in matters of power – attaining, maintaining, and exercising. Power is a curious creature, particularly in terms of how it rears its head in individual interactions and in the realm of politics. (Note: seeking to understand the mechanisms of operation is beyond the scope of the paper, which for now, aims to simply acknowledge a broader and complex relationship between power and race.)

Power, at one level, imperceptibly drives policy, practice, and decision-making, particularly in a neoliberal context. Governments yield power from the symbolism embedded in race conceptualisations and by the inclusion/exclusion of certain groups of people, which is driven by political agendas. French intellectual Michel Foucault offered interesting insights into how

power operates and the governmentality behind certain decision-making – his terms 'biopower' and 'biopolitics' are significant in understanding how the state denotes a particular 'form of governmental power which addresses the administration, control and regulation of human beings as members of populations: their health, sanitation, birth-rate, longevity, race' (Christie, 2006: 375). For Foucault, power is to be explored in every micro manifestation, in the most imperceptible places – 'his concern is to explore 'strategies of power': networks, mechanism and techniques as well as the accompanying rationalities which normalise acts of power so that there is a sense that a particular decision 'could not but be taken in the way it was' (Christie, 2006: 375). Following this understanding of power and decision-making, it can be understood how race distinction and division was instituted via policy and practice. It is imperative, however, to note that the 'regimes of truth' that governments relied on were not rational laws or foundational truths, but were rather results of particular strategies in exercising power that were either by chance or illusory in driving a particular political agenda which the government rationalised as necessary. In this manner, race was a construct of the power wielded by the apartheid government. Similarly, in an effort to collapse this bias and injustice, the democratic government relied on transformation policies which also privileged race, but, as a strategy to empower rather than disempower, and to institute social justice as a means to rectify past injustices. Race, therefore, embodied complex strategies to exercise power from a political/governmental perspective.

On another level, power is existent in the intricate relations between individuals – their actions, their subjectivities, their prejudices, and their treatment of others. In this sense, race holds a power identity because it is 'fundamentally a power construct of blended difference that lives socially. Race creates new forms of power: the power to categorise and judge, elevate and downgrade, include and exclude' (Kendi, 2019). It is evident in the relationships that each individual shares with others in terms of how they relate and interact, but is more subtly displayed in the self via personal beliefs and understandings of the world, society, and people. It is evident in our everyday lives and decisions: where to live, what transportation to take, which route to drive, what area or neighbourhood to walk in, which schools to

send one's children to, and where to shop, eat, or travel. It is in the subconscious ideas that we hold, that guide our decision making, and that denote particular subjectivities. Power, therefore, lives both in the internal and external self, and is manifested in outward action by people, society, and organisations, based on each individual's context, history, upbringing, and conditioning.

South Africa's complicated history has pre-determined that its people, therefore, will always have race as a part of their construct. What is unfailingly disconcerting, however, is that the power that was wielded years ago by the apartheid government still has lasting effects on South African individuals, society, and organisations. This can be particularly attributed to the fact that neoliberal institutional arrangements have positioned the marginalised in a particular way and have entrenched divisions so deeply that they have yet to be unravelled.

### **Coxswaining transformation – South African education in crisis**

Transformation initiatives were imperative to chartering a new path of democracy in an effort to address the years of suppression, racial division, and exclusion. The continuous struggle, however, is how to transform, what to transform, and how to ensure that transformation is successful in changing the realities of the previously disadvantaged. The term transformation has gained traction over the years as a widely-used expression to institute change, but what exactly is meant by transformation? For the purposes of this article, in the South African post-1994 context, transformation is closely aligned to concepts like equity, redress, and social justice, where the transforming of the education system is seen to be closely tied to societal improvement and fundamental social change. More often than not, change is understood as political, social, and economic, and is about reversing the effects of the past. Akoojee and Nkomo note that 'the challenge for the success of education strategies, however, lies in the need to balance issues of institutional autonomy and change with the national imperatives of efficiency, equity and redress' (2007: 366). However, transformation is complex and faces the struggle of the embeddedness of race in South African societal makeup. Furthermore, transformation initiatives have

---

“ What is unfailingly disconcerting, however, is that the power that was wielded years ago by the apartheid government still has lasting effects on South African individuals, society, and organisations. This can be particularly attributed to the fact that neoliberal institutional arrangements have positioned the marginalised in a particular way and have entrenched divisions so deeply that they have yet to be unravelled. ”

---

been flawed by the guidance of neoliberal policies and the fields of power, politics, and economics, which is why these initiatives have not been truly achievable. Damning socio-economic conditions and poor standards of living for a large population of previously disadvantaged communities in South Africa have been ongoing concerns of the post-apartheid era.

The years 2020 and 2021 have been blatant examples of these struggles, as Covid-19 has unearthed the realities that have always existed in the education terrain: an unequal education system which has privileged the privileged (and still does). This is due to education operating in a neoliberal environment in which humans are viewed as 'capital' for a means to an end in economic growth and development, i.e. those who gain education and pass through the system effortlessly will benefit the economy by getting higher-paying jobs, which leads to the system prioritising those who have a higher probability of success. Livingstone explains this as human capital theory which 'equates workers' knowledge levels with their level of formal schooling, to rely on quantitative indices of amount of schooling in estimating individual economic returns to learning and to infer that more schooling would lead to higher productivity and macroeconomic growth' (1997: 9). Following this thought process, explicit and blatant contradictions are evident in the schooling sector, which has been spotlighted in terms of the governmentality behind

the opening of schools and completing the academic year during the Covid-19 pandemic.

### **The Covid-19 moment in a neoliberal world**

In an interview with Times Live, the South African Democratic Teachers' Union (SADTU) stated that 'corpses can neither be taught, nor teach' (Govender, 2020). This simple yet heavily loaded statement struck a chord and erupted an explosion of emotion in many citizens – an anger at the ill-thought-through plans to let our students and teachers be our 'soldiers', as Minister of Basic Education, Angie Motshekga, called it. However, what guides the decision-making behind the opening of schools to save the academic year at all costs? Is it truly a fight for aiding our disadvantaged students and providing them with an education? Is it truly social justice concerns? I argue, not! The reality is that the 'hidden' neoliberal hand is always at play. When lockdown was announced in March 2020, all 'privileged' schools shifted to teaching online almost immediately. Their students sat in the comfort of their technologically-friendly homes and quickly adapted to Zoom classes, Google Drive, and virtual learning in a stable home life that supported their new schooling environment. Academically, they were on par with the curriculum, if not ahead, and were able to keep up with learning, bar a few adjustments here and there.

Contrast that with the rural child, or the child who lives in an informal settlement whose reality could not be further from the above described. These children live in households that survive on a minimum wage or less, their parent/s are essential workers who risk their lives just to provide food for the day, or their parents are now unemployed and overcome with the struggle of not knowing how to provide a meal at all. These children become the unsuspecting victims of a further unjust, unequal divide. Those who live in a small space inhabited by many, and have no room to sit and learn, or further still, those who have no laptop, data, or phone are, ironically, left further behind in so-called 'tech-schooling' – a gap the Department of Basic Education vehemently, yet hypocritically, asserts they are bridging. If anything, the gap has widened, and still is widening, at an alarming rate.

Forget technology though, for the only thing that matters right now is survival. These children and their families face a plethora of struggles of great

magnitude: physically, emotionally, materially, and financially. Many have lost their jobs, have lost their loved ones, and are hungry and scared. Many do not have the privilege of social distancing, sanitising, and wearing a mask. These children have lost far more than just the academic year, and this is precisely what the government fails to acknowledge. In the quest for health, safety, and survival, the government has, not for the first time, prioritised differently – placing the completion of the academic year above lives. People have been reduced to mere statistics and insignificant extras in the theatre of life – like fists in a container of water. Remove the fist, and one cannot tell the difference.

In proudly announcing the resumption of schools and the completion of the academic year in the midst of a pandemic, the government relied on the logic of providing meals to hungry children, providing a safe haven to shelter students from abusive homes, and the provision of an equal opportunity for these children to receive an education so that they would not fall behind and drop out of school. At face value, this sounds noble, democratic, and fair, but if we truly unpack this, it reeks with the aroma of a neoliberal political agenda packed with misinformed solutions.

Firstly, what is the true purpose of schooling? The pandemic has shown that schools have become the panacea for all ills. Schools have become day-cares with pastoral functions that operate as points of nutrition acquirement – a weak response to solving other non-learning issues. This hides the government's inability to truly address the real issues of the socio-economic conditions faced by many disadvantaged communities. Instead of ensuring that no citizen goes hungry with focused efforts in job creation and broader community feeding projects, they rely on schools to provide a meal a day to only attending students.

Secondly, a critical mistake made by a neoliberal and capitalist-driven government is attributing education to the field of power, politics, and economics in using the school as a day-care for children, so that parents can resume work to reopen the economy. Whilst reopening the economy is essential to maintaining the livelihoods of, particularly, the disadvantaged, it is misinformed to not outrightly acknowledge that schools were being called on to play a different role

---

“ Our education system privileges the privileged, and perpetuates socio-economic divides in our society, wherein our poor sink further into the cesspool of poverty and disadvantage. We are not addressing the true problems faced by poor socio-economic conditions and are, instead, bandaging the wounds with neoliberal policies ”

---

other than to provide education. This is essential in determining whether the academic year can and should be saved. Once again, this reiterates the socio-economic divide, as the privileged still continue safely – either online or physically in properly resourced schools with small class numbers – whilst children from disadvantaged communities, who have not been learning online, are now faced with a storm of anxieties. These children are pressured into cram-learning a curriculum on staggered days in order to write exams and pass the year, and are forced to return to schools which lack proper infrastructure, have poor sanitation facilities, and possibly no running water – all whilst facing untold struggles at home.

Thirdly, try as much as we may, the playing field is not level. Teaching and learning in this crisis (and in general) mean different things to different communities based on their privilege. The reality is that saving the academic year is not a social justice decision, but rather a decision driven by neoliberal mindsets and capitalistic gain which benefits the economy and the privileged. The decision has been wrapped in the guise of transformative thinking and concern for equal opportunity and education, but at the heart of it lies a contradiction which essentially heavily disadvantages the poor child of colour.

Covid-19 has explicitly shown that the schooling system is a site of power where race and class continuously play out as variables of inclusion/exclusion. The ghastly truth that we fearfully hide away from is that the poor, disadvantaged child of

colour – who hails from a range of societal, economic, and financial issues – has been ‘given up on’. We no longer consider these children to be worth fighting for. They have been left so far behind in the race that we can barely see them on the horizon. We focus on achievements and standards, goals and accomplishments. We see humans as capital and commodities to enter the workforce to add to our GDP. We have lost sight of our humanity.

Each year, as we progress to the next level, we nonchalantly acknowledge the need for further transformation initiatives to rescue the marginalised without a deliberate attempt to truly impact the reality, and this unfortunately is the unadorned contradiction of democracy in our country. Our education system privileges the privileged, and perpetuates socio-economic divides in our society, wherein our poor sink further into the cesspool of poverty and disadvantage. We are not addressing the true problems faced by poor socio-economic conditions and are, instead, bandaging the wounds with neoliberal policies and false hope by providing broken crutches to a very dysfunctional and ailing society. Government has not yet achieved the disentanglement of past inequalities and so we limp through institutional arrangements which have positioned the marginalised in a particular manner – their plight unaided by the failure to unravel these injustices that continue to hamper healing.

### **Re-imagining: a turn to anti-racism, decoloniality, and re-defining transformation**

So, where then does this leave us? Do we sink silently in the cesspool of mourning and complexities within which we find ourselves entangled, or do we grab onto ideas of hope, reimagining, and deliberate action to pull us out of the drowning? Do we succumb to a directionless defeat or do we use the compass of opportunity to guide us to a new reality, a new world order?

Balfour, explaining James Baldwin’s ideas of racial innocence, defined it as: ‘a willful ignorance, a resistance to facing the horrors of the American past and present and the implications for the future’ (2001: 27). Although written for American society, this quote is significant for South African society, as well, in reiterating how complacent we have become as a society in truly understanding

the effects that institutionalised racism has had on our country, the society we live in, and on each individual. Transformation is a long road and navigating change is complex and challenging. In acknowledging that, to date, the government has not been able to truly institute the required change, we need not succumb to pessimism, but rather use the current situation as an opportunity to pave forth a new direction – a turn to anti-racism, decoloniality, and re-defining transformation.

If we are to truly heal and forge a new path, we need to grapple with the enormity of race disparity and inequality prevalent in our society. We need to acknowledge the pain and hurt experienced by the recipients of the system and its grave effects, which are still embedded today. We need to engage, not only from a symbolic position, but to create change physically in changing the lived realities of the marginalised. We need to all actively be anti-racist. What does it mean to be truly anti-racist though? Anti-racism is a term which has gained traction in recent months, particularly in the wake of the #BlackLivesMatter movement. However, the term has been used and defined widely prior to this. Underpinning the comprehensibility of anti-racism, is the acknowledgement of the premise that to be anti-racist, one must be against racism and fully conscious of privilege – one must see race, acknowledge, and identify how racism is prevalent in structures, institutionalisation, beliefs, and behaviours, and then actively resist all forms of racism in attempting to create a change in these practices, in turn creating a transformation of being in the world (Kendi, 2019). Anti-racism is about examining every aspect of: (a) interpersonal interactions that result in power imbalances between people of different races, and which disadvantage the Black (refers to all non-white people) person; (b) the acknowledgement of white privilege which perpetuates difference and racism, and which is often unrecognisable, but impacts how 'whiteness' has promoted and advantaged one's progress, standing, and access in all facets of life. It encompasses an awareness of how racism has affected people of colour and how it still does; how racism has been systematically engrained in society via previous institutionalised policies, via behaviours and attitudes, via unspoken and subtle inherent beliefs and actions; how it has hampered progress and access to education, a better standard of living, employment, and a respectable socio-economic standing for the

Black person, not excluding the personal, mental, and emotional turmoil experienced. Therefore, particularly in our South African context, being anti-racist is a necessary, non-negotiable prerequisite in charting a new path and reimagining our society – it is the first step to becoming authentically aware of the true transformation required to create a society based on true principles of equity, equality, and justice.

A second aspect necessary to reimagining our society is that of decoloniality. According to Maldonado-Torres:

Colonialism denotes a political and economic relation in which the sovereignty of a nation or a people rests on the power of another nation, which makes such nation an empire. Coloniality, instead, refers to long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism, but that define culture, labor, intersubjective relations, and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial administrations. Thus, coloniality survives colonialism. It is maintained alive in books, in the criteria for academic performance, in cultural patterns, in common sense, in the self-image of peoples, in aspirations of self, and so many other aspects of our modern experience. In a way, as modern subjects we breathe coloniality all the time and every day (2007: 243).

South Africa's history of apartheid, shadowed by colonialism and its current operation in a neoliberal world, has complexified racism and the inequalities prevalent in our society, and so, if we are to truly unravel the deep-rooted scars embedded, we must use this narrative and moment as an opportunity to address coloniality. We need to assess how, as a society in all its functions, we still embody ideas of coloniality. We need to have deliberate conversations to shift power and define an 'African' identity without a 'north' influence – via education structure, curriculum, knowledge, practices, the order of society, economic policies and shifts in thought, awareness, and understanding. The process is, and will be, arduous and multifaceted, and will be a perpetual undertaking; however, it is one that South Africa desperately needs to incessantly pursue in order to institute meaningful change. The moment is now – timing, circumstances, practicalities, acknowledgement of our country's socio-economic context and rational thought are what is needed to guide us on the plan moving forward.

Therefore, this combination of decoloniality and anti-racist practices are the suggested tools required to aid us in re-defining tangible transformation in our country. In acknowledging the many blatant contradictions evident in the governance of the country, particularly in the education terrain, we need to take responsibility and make a commitment to rectifying failed transformation initiatives, even if this means abandoning the neoliberal principles that have been surreptitiously crafted into the order of society. In addressing the above highlighted education crisis, we need to acknowledge that the opening of schools will not be just. We need to acknowledge that the education terrain is rife with injustice and contradictions and that there are countless issues of inequality in the staggered opening of schools and saving the academic year amidst Covid-19. However, we must then take this as the opportunity to open not just a conversation, but an action plan towards the re-imagining of a new world based on a platform of social justice and genuine transformation. We must make a commitment to fight for the marginalised child of colour who is left far behind on the horizon, and pledge that we will rescue their future so that they, and future generations, can all walk side by side. We need to question and re-define the role of education, of schools, and of tertiary institutions. We need to re-define our structures and curriculum by analysing what was, what exists, what the pitfalls are, and what needs to transform for true equity, equality, and justice to prevail. We need to veer away from viewing individuals as capital and instead commit to acknowledging each human as a being who is essential and important to society and our country as a whole. We need to value every life irrespective of race, gender, sexuality, class, religion, and creed. We need to reimagine our rainbow nation to achieve the dream that Tata Madiba so fervently believed we could realise. We need to create a movement that will ignite and accelerate this paradigm shift, and we need to understand that movement is a verb.

Finally, returning to Arundhati Roy's quote in her article 'The pandemic is a portal': 'Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next' (2020). This quote so aptly captures the mantra for reimagining the future and hints at the necessity for change, an opportunity for betterment. Will we, however, take it, or

will we perish further into a drain of murky contradictions carved with the scars of the past and racial indifference? Will we forge a new future and make our mark as the generation who realised and actualised anti-racism, decoloniality, and transformation in creating a new world order, or will we simply remain pawns on a chessboard moved aimlessly (yet covertly calculatedly) around by a neoliberal political agenda, and according to a variety of contradictions?

---

## References

- Akoojee, S. and Nkomo, M. (2007). 'Access and quality in South African higher education: the twin challenges of transformation'. *South African Journal of Higher Education*. 21(3): 385–399
- Balfour, L. (2001). *The Evidence of Things Not Said: James Baldwin and the Promise of American Democracy*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press
- Christie, P. (2006). 'Changing Regimes: Governmentality and Education Policy in Post-Apartheid South Africa'. *International Journal of Educational Development*. 26(2006): 373–381
- Clarno, A. (2017). *Neoliberal Apartheid: Palestine/Israel and South Africa After 1994*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press
- Connell, R. and Dados, N. (2014). 'Where in the world does neoliberalism come from? The market agenda in southern perspective.' *Theory and Society*. 43(2): 117–138
- Govender, P. (2020). 'SADTU calls for strict health protocols before pupils, teachers return to school.' *Times Live*. [online] Available at: <https://www.timeslive.co.za/news/south-africa/2020-04-24-sadtu-calls-for-strict-health-protocols-before-pupils-teachers-return-to-school/>
- Harvey, D. (2005). *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Kendi, I.X. (2019). *How to Be an Antiracist*. New York: One World
- Kgatlhe, M.S. (2020). 'The Relationship between the Economic Strand of Contemporary Pentecostalism and Neo-Liberalism in Post-1994 South Africa'. *Religions*. 11(156): 1–10
- Livingstone, D.W. (1997). 'The limits of human capital theory: expanding knowledge, informal learning and underemployment'. *Policy Options*. 18(6): 9–13
- Maldonado-Torres, N. (2007). 'On the coloniality of being'. *Cultural Studies*. 21(2): 240–270.
- Mandela, R.N. (2003). Address by Nelson Mandela at launch of Mindset Network: Lighting your way to a better future. Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela. [online] Available at: [http://www.mandela.gov.za/mandela\\_speeches/2003/030716\\_mindset.htm](http://www.mandela.gov.za/mandela_speeches/2003/030716_mindset.htm)
- Roy, A. (2020). 'The pandemic is a portal'. *Financial Times*. [online] Available at: <https://www.ft.com/content/10d8f5e8-74eb-11ea-95fe-fcd274e920ca>
- Samoff, J. (1996). 'Which priorities and strategies for education?' *International Journal of Education Development*. 16(3): 249–271
- Soudien, C. and Sayed, Y. (2004). 'A New Racial State? Exclusion and Inclusion in Education Policy and Practice in South Africa.' *Perspectives in Education*. 22(4): 101–115
- Soudien, C. (2012). *Realising the Dream: Unlearning the Logic of Race in the South African School*. Cape Town: HSRC Press
- Williams, D.R. (1997). 'Race and Health: Basic Questions, Emerging Directions'. *Annals of Epidemiology*. July, 7(5): 322–333