‘Against the odds’: A reflection on institutional and black doctors’ narratives of achievement at the University of Natal’s Medical School

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Introduction

In 1951, just two and a half years after the apartheid government came into power, a medical school opened in Durban in the province of Natal. Unlike other medical schools in operation in South Africa at the time, Durban’s medical school, which was funded mostly by the apartheid government, was established as a black faculty built on a racially segregated campus and administered by the historically white University of Natal (UN) (Brookes 1996). The creation of this institution was an important development. Certainly, before it was created, earlier efforts to train black students in the medical field in a racially segregated context had meant channeling women into nursing and men into shortened, sub-standard, medical aid training schemes, except for a token few who were trained at the Universities of the Witwatersrand (Wits) and Cape Town (UCT) during the Second World War (Shapiro 1987; Marks 1994). The opening of the University of Natal Medical School (UNMS) thus offered a larger number of black (i.e. so-called “African,” “Indian” and “Coloured”) students the opportunity to train as fully qualified medical doctors on a segregated basis (Noble 2013).

During the apartheid period, medical school employees and students had to contend with a negative master narrative, created by white South Africans in all spheres of life, which portrayed black South Africans as culturally and intellectually inferior, deficient or limited (Dubow 1995). Indeed, this “deficit” discourse had for decades promoted a perspective of under-achievement and failure for black communities (Harper 2009). And, it was this narrative that came to influence the experiences of those who worked at the medical school, as well as those who studied there. Yet, this narrative did not go unquestioned or unchallenged. Using written sources, such as university brochures, staff and student publications and newsletters from the 1950s to 1990s, I argued in my paper that staff and students, during this period, worked to construct narratives of achievement as counter-narratives to the deficit narratives in widespread circulation at the time.

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Staff narratives of achievement

My paper analysed several examples of written accounts produced by various deans and teaching staff (most of whom were white during the period under study), which promoted high standards-focused achievement narratives about their medical school (University of KwaZulu-Natal Archive; Gale 1976; Reid 1976). It then went on to consider why these narratives were promoted by these people. I argued that many of those employed at the medical school during the apartheid years would have been sensitive to the deficit discourse that linked black medical education with inferiority and under-achievement. This not only reflected negatively on the institution they worked for, but also on their personal reputations. Although they would have come to work at the school for various reasons, most of the staff would have bought into, and indeed, energetically promoted an image of their school as a place of high standards and positive achievement to show that they had not settled in their decisions to work at a black institution in an apartheid context.

Students' narratives of achievement

An analysis of several student publications produced during the apartheid period also highlights the construction of narratives that stressed high standards, and students' ability to achieve such standards despite their many difficulties, including racism by some staff, poor student accommodation, and sub-standard clinical training facilities (Mlisana 1995, 11-12; Mokoena 2001). For example, in 1976 an unnamed student wrote:

> We congratulate the graduates on their splendid performance, and we commend them for their courage in coming … to a segregated medical school. To start with, there were murmurs of disapproval from many angles. But it was not long before a determined staff [and student body] convinced the world that the doctors produced here would be inferior to none […] and the standards acquired compare with those of any doctor in the country. (University of KwaZulu-Natal Archive 1958, 6)

Similar to the school's staff, its students were aware of the societal deficit discourse in circulation about black-only educational facilities, and such statements suggest a keenness by students to undermine this negativity by creating counter-narratives that placed their school and qualifications in a positive light.

However, while some students produced counter-narratives, which placed them in alignment with the staff, others did not. Although the staff promoted narratives of achievement based on attainment of high medical educational standards, in reality, black students studied in an environment where they continued to experience racial inequalities and discrimination. This led to a high failure rate, and indeed, underachievement for many. Frustration and anger led to the development, in the late 1960s and through the 1970s of a different kind of counter-narrative that worked to undermine the deficit

narrative, but in a different way. Indeed, a Black Consciousness (BC) discourse, promoted by activists in the South African Students Organisation (SASO), which had its founding headquarters at the Durban medical students' residence in the late 1960s, worked to inspire black South Africans to develop a more positive mindset and to stand up to their oppressors in all areas of life (Noble 2013). Analyses of SASO documents from the time highlight narratives that stressed pride in one's blackness and the quest to challenge, what SASO activist, Steve Biko called white-created "false negatives," which led to the denigration of black South African identities, value systems, cultural traditions, accomplishments and histories in apartheid South Africa (Biko n/d, 1; Biko 1970/1971, 5). Over time, the BC movement's positive identity affirming, confidence boosting, cultural empowering narratives helped to conscientise many people and gave more people, including Durban medical students, the confidence to question and challenge inequalities and discriminations which negatively affected them, and which, over time, slowly led to improvements in their lives (Noble 2013).

Conclusion

This paper considered how similar high standards-focused meritocratic narratives could be produced by people who occupied different positions (i.e. student or teacher) in a particular medical educational historical context. They produced counter-narratives which were directed towards the wider deficit discourses in circulation about black students and segregated education at the time. However, further analysis also demonstrates that while staff and some students' narratives could and did align, others did not. Analysis of BC discourses produced by politically active students highlight that some students questioned the façade of high standards-linked achievement narratives in a context where inequalities produced underachievement for many. Instead, they promoted a different kind of counter-narrative that encouraged black students to question standards as well as excellence framed in "white" or "western" terms, to define achievement in their own terms, and to strive to overthrow the system that oppressed black South Africans. Indeed, black student activists promoted this latter point as their future achievement goal, which sometimes came at the expense of their educational aspirations.

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