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Social Inclusion & Exclusion in a Changing Higher Education Environment

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Abstract

This article reviews demographic shifts in access to higher education in South Africa from the late 1980s onwards before going on to look at the extent to which black South Africans have benefitted from those shifts. In the context of analyses which show that black South Africans experience less success in the higher education system than their white peers, the paper argues that dominant understandings of what is needed to succeed are inadequate in explaining the data. In opposition to dominant understandings, the paper goes on to propose that only 'social' accounts of learning allow us to make sense of black students' experiences. At the same time, however, resilience of dominant accounts is acknowledged.

Keywords: Higher education, South Africa, Success rates, Social accounts of learning.

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South Africa's first democratic election, held in 1994, heralded a new era for the country's public higher education system. Before democracy, the system had been fractured along a number of lines the first, and most significant, of which was race. Separate institutions had been established for the different racial categories of apartheid, 'African', 'Coloured', 'Indian' and 'White'[1], although, for more than a decade before the election, small numbers of black students had been able to access institutions other than those intended for them thanks to slight relaxations of some apartheid laws. Apartheid ideology had resulted in institutions intended for white students being more highly resourced than those intended for black social groups. The advent of democracy meant, however, that, in principle at least, all institutions were available to all students regardless of their skin colour.

A second split in the system inherited by the democratic government elected in 1994 distinguished between 'traditional' universities and 'technikons' - institutions offering vocationally focused qualifications. Technikons tended to focus on offering diplomas rather than degrees and, in comparison to the universities, enjoyed small postgraduate enrolments. Yet another split involved language. Under apartheid, English and Afrikaans were the two official languages of learning and teaching in higher education with some institutions serving Afrikaans speaking language groups only.

Location signaled yet another fracture. A number of institutions had been established in the 'bantustans', self-governing 'homelands' established for black social groups. These 'homelands' were located outside the main urban areas and the universities established within them were rural in location with the result that the potential for collaboration and interaction with other academic institutions was limited.

Given these fractures, the task for the first democratic government was to establish a single, coherent higher education system which would serve all South Africans equally, regardless of social group.

Kraak (1999, p. 87) terms the period between the unbanning of the African National Congress (ANC) in 1989 to the election in 1994 the

'pretaking of power era'. In relation to higher education, the most important policy document produced during this period was the National Education Policy Investigation (NEPI) Report (1992) on Postsecondary Education. The NEPI, involving an alliance between the African National Congress (ANC), the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) and progressive educators has been variously termed a unique 'civil society initiative' (Badat, 2003, p. 6) and a 'people's educa-tion project' (Cloete, 2002, p. 94). Given its location in history, a major concern for the NEPI was the achievement of equity which was defined in its report as 'the improved distribution of educational resources to disadvantaged communities' (1992, p. 11). For higher education, this meant increased access for black students and the growth within the system needed to accommodate them.

The idea that equity could be achieved through growth (i.e. through what has come to be termed 'massification') was followed through in succeeding higher education policy work. The 1997 White Paper on Higher Education (Department of Education, 1997), entitled 'A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education', set out the principles on which an expanded higher education system would be based and again identified an increase in enrolments as a means of achieving equity. The National Plan for Higher Education (NPHE) (Department of Education, 2002) then attempted to use a number of strategies and levers including mergers and funding to establish a single, coherent and enlarged system. As a result of the National Plan, the 36 institutions of apartheid were reduced to 23 universities classified according to three 'types': 'traditional' universi-ties, universities of technology and 'comprehensive' universities offering a mix of traditional and vocational programmes.

Massification and demographic shifts in access

The raised expectations of black South Africans in a context where the bonds of apartheid were loosening can be seen in the growth in enrolments in higher education amongst this social group in the period 1986 to 1993. According to the report produced by a National Commission for Higher Education appointed by Nelson Mandela

(NCHE, 1996) the number of African students at universities and technikons in this period grew by an average of 14% per year. In contrast, the annual average growth for White students was only 0.4%. Regardless of this growth, the percentage of the 20-24 year old cohort enrolled in higher education (also widely termed the 'participation rate' following the UNESCO lead) remained inequitable. In 1993, the participation rate for White students was 70% yet only 12% for Africans (NCHE, 1996, p. 64) in spite of the increased numbers who had managed to access higher education. Sadly, these disparities have not diminished over time. An analysis of the cohort of students admitted to South African higher education in 2000 (Scott et al., 2007) shows an overall participation rate of 16%, disaggregated to 60% for White students, 51% for Indians and 12% each for African and Coloured groups. A participation rate of 12% for African and Coloured students is also reported for 2007 (CHE, 2009). What appears to be the case, therefore, is that the participation rate for African and Coloured social groups has remained stable for nearly twenty years. The proportion of young black people entering higher education has not changed in spite of the shift to democracy and all the policy this has entailed.

Enrolment patterns have changed, however. The early 1990s saw large numbers of African students seeking to enroll at historically white institutions which were perceived to be better resourced and more prestigious (Cooper & Subotsky, 2001). Notable in this general shift was the desire for vocationally based qualifications in a population which had long been denied access to high-esteem, highearning occupations. As a result, the historically black traditional universities, many of which were located in rural areas or on the fringes of major urban centres, became less attractive to the studentsthey had been established to serve. Added to the ability of black students to self select an institution at which to study was the general push towards 'transformation' on white campuses. This saw historically white, and therefore well-resourced, institutions deliberately seeking to recruit students from black social groups. Often this was achieved by offering bursaries or other financial means intended to make study possible and by introducing alternative access routes which saw students being assessed on 'potential' rather than actual achievement in the school leaving examinations. By the late 1990s and early 2000s, therefore, ma-

ny historically black institutions were suffering from falling enrollments and the financial constraints resulting from the concomitant loss of state subsidy and tuition fees (Bunting, 2002).

The NPHE (Department of Education, 2003, p.7) notes ‘intensified competition’ as public higher education institutions sought to enroll students. Some of this competition manifested itself in the development of distance education programmes of institutions which had traditionally offered contact tuition (ibid). Far higher number of black students than white students were enrolled in these distance programmes, however, with the result that, for many black students, distance education provided the main access route to higher education (ibid, p. 32). The potential of higher education to contribute to wider social shifts in the country, most especially in relation to the professional classes, therefore was affected by enrolment patterns as well as by participation rates.

Success in Higher Education

Of more concern than the way access has played out since 1990, are figures related to success in South African higher education. Scott, Yeld & Hendry’s (2007) cohort study provides a chilling analysis in this respect by showing that, by the end of 2004 (that is, five years after entering higher education), only 30% of the cohort of students admitted to South African institutions of higher education had graduated. 56% had left the institutions at which they had initially registered without graduating and 14% were still in the system. More significant is the fact that figures for black students were much worse than those for their white peers regardless of institution, area of study or type of qualification. As Scott et al. (ibid) point out, this means that the gains made in enrolment by black students are negated by figures for success.

At a social level, this observation is indicative of a tragedy of enormous proportions. In a context still affected the legacy of apartheid, for most black South Africans, a higher education qualification signifies an escape from the grueling poverty which has plagued their families and communities for generations. At a national level, and given the focus on high skills needed for participation in a globalised economy (see, for example, Finegold & Soskice, 1988), the failure of the South African higher education system to graduate the students it enrolls im-

impacts on economic development which could further benefit black citizens.

Given the significance of a higher education to black students and also of attempts to promote equity by increasing the number of students participating in tertiary education, how are we to understand the causes of the disparities between black and white students' success in the South African system? Answering this question is key to any attempt to address them. It is to understandings of the disparities that this paper now turns.

Autonomous views of learning and learners

In South Africa as, arguably, in most other places in the world, dominant understandings of what is needed to succeed in education draw on individualized, psychologised views of learners and of learning. Such understandings locate success in factors inherent to the individual such as intelligence, ability, aptitude, motivation and so on. In places where the language of learning and teaching is not the home language of learners, then ability in an additional language is also cited though this too tends to be constructed as an attribute of the individual (see, for example, Boughey, 2002).

Accounts which draw on psychologised and individualized views of learning tend to construct lack of success as a due to a deficit in the individual. Learners may lack the 'ability', 'talent' or 'potential' to learn. They might not have the 'aptitude' for particular kinds of learning or the 'motivation' to learn in ways expected.

They may also construct a lack of success as due to deficits in the 'skills' needed to succeed. In the higher education context, this view is manifest in attributions of students' failure to their lack of 'study skills', 'reading skills', 'writing skills' or 'notetaking skills' where the failure to develop these skills is, in turn, often linked to deficiencies in schooling. The lack of the 'skill' is, nonetheless, located in the individual. Where the language of learning and teaching is an additional language (as in South Africa where the use of English is dominant in spite of the fact that the indigenous African languages are home languages for a large number of students), then a lack of "language proficiency" or "language skills" is often cited.

Skills based understandings tend to lead to remedial measures intended to address the gaps. Students may be enrolled in courses with the aim of developing these skills although, as I will argue below, the chances of this being achieved are minimal given critiques of the status of 'skills' themselves and of the role of language in learning and teaching which will be discussed below.

Significant to the use of psychologised, individualized accounts of learning in South Africa is the data related to success noted earlier in this paper which shows that black students, regardless of the university at which they are enrolled, the qualification for which they are studying or the subject area they have chosen to pursue, do less well than their white peers (Scott et al., 2007). If we locate the potential to succeed in factors inherent to the individual, then black students' lack of success compared to their white peers would result in a claim that these factors were not distributed evenly across the population. In any context, let alone South Africa, such a claim would be abhorrent. In spite of this, individualized and psychologised accounts of learning continue to dominate higher education thinking and are indicative of a failure to interrogate claim to its logical conclusion.

Social accounts of learning

Alternatives lie in accounts of learning which construct learning as a socially embedded phenomenon. Such accounts recognize many different types of learning, with 'academic' learning being but one, albeit privileged, type. I have termed the individualized, psychologised accounts of learning discussed above 'autonomous' because they cons-truct individuals as independent or autonomous of the social contexts in which they were raised and live in contrast to what I will term social accounts which see individuals as shaped by those contexts.

In South Africa, social accounts of learning allow us to make more sense of data describing success and failure across the higher education system since they allow us to relate the poor performance of black students to the social contexts into which the majority were born, aswell as to the way apartheid continues to impact on those contexts regardless of the time which has elapsed since the advent of democracy.

A text which has been seminal in informing social understandings of learning in South Africa is James Paul Gee's Social Linguistics and Literacies, originally published in 1990 but now in its third edition. Gee argues that individuals are socialized, from birth, into what he terms 'Discourses', where the capitalization of the term 'Discourse' in indicative of a specialized meaning. For Gee, a Discourse is a saying-doing -thinking-believing-valuing combination, or role, which signals membership of a social group. Discourses are inherently ideological and some are more prestigious and powerful than others.

All individuals are socialized into a 'primary' Discourse, which, as Gee points out:

> . . . gives us our initial and often enduring sense of self and sets the foundations of our culturally specific vernacular language (our "everyday language"), the language in which we speak and act as "everyday" (non- specialized) people, and our culturally specific vernacular identity (2008, p.156).

Socialisation into a primary Discourse occurs in the home. Secondary Discourses are acquired in the public sphere, in institutions such as schooling, religious groupings, businesses, community or political organisations.

Critically, and as already noted, some Discourses are more prestigious, and therefore more powerful, than others. Over time, some social groups incorporate elements of secondary 'elevated' Discourse into their primary Discourses. This is often the case with religious secondary Discourses where values, beliefs and practices associated with them are incorporated into home based practices. It is also the case for school-based Discourses where parents, who have themselves been educated and who thus have acquired secondary Discourses associated with schooling, bring beliefs, values and practices associated with schooling into the primary Discourse of the home.

A number of ethnographic accounts of this phenomenon exist in the literature. In their study of Athabaskan Indians, for example, Scollon & Scollon (1981) compare their own practices in raising their daughter with those they observe in the community in which they are living. One practice involves teaching their daughter to answer questions to which the asker already knows the answer – something which Athabaskan chil-

dren clearly demonstrate they associate with schooling rather than the home. Heath's (1983) ethnography of three communities, two working class and one middle class, in the north Carolinas in the United States also shows how the middle class parents (called 'townspeople' in the study) induct their children into the values and practices associated with formal schooling. In contrast, the two working class communities (named 'Roadville' and 'Trackton') one white and one black, employ practices and embody values which are alternative to those of the educational institutions their children will need to access if they are to be successful.

As a result of the incorporation of values and practices associated with formal institutions such as education into home based Discourses, the primary Discourses into which some individuals are socialized are much closer to 'elevated' secondary Discourses than others. Individuals socialized into such Discourses enter schooling with an advantage over their peers. A child who knows, for example, that she is expected to answer a question to which her teacher already knows the answer, is more likely to respond in class, and thus participate in 'sanctioned' learning activities than a peer who wonders why her teacher is doing this. A child who views reading as something to be enjoyed will have an advantage over a child who sees reading as something which is apart from everyday life regardless of the fact that both children might have the same levels of 'technical' literacy (in the sense of being able to encode and decode from print) when they enter school.

A closer examination of academic Discourses reinforces the argument I am trying to make here more clearly. Academic Discourses centre on a set of values and attitudes around what can count as knowledge and how that knowledge can be known. Given the many orientations to knowledge and knowing which exist, it is appropriate to think of academic Discourses as multiple rather than unitary. Discourse associated practices (Gee's, 2008) ways of doing, acting, speaking and so on) arise from these values and attitudes. In the natural sciences, for example, knowledge production is based on a view of knowledge as independent of human thought and action.

Seeking or 'uncovering' this knowledge involves researchers valuing objectivity. This valuing then plays out in practices such as wearing white coats and surgical gloves as experiments or observations are con-

ducted as well as in language use where the phrase ‘I titrated 5 mls of the solution’ is eschewed in favour of the passive ‘5 mls of the solu-tion were titrated’ as, in acknowledging agency, the former introduces the possibility of error. Values towards what can count as knowledge and how that knowledge can be known (for example, knowledge as something simply to be remembered and regurgitated or as something which is constructed in an evidence-based argument) are modeled in homes. If the primary Discourse models knowledge related values which are closer to those of academic Discourses, then students entering higher education will be prepared for the sort of learning required of them there.

What in higher education is often termed ‘critical reading’ provides an example of the way values related to what can count as knowledge underpin academic practice. An academic value is that knowledge claims should always be subject to scrutiny and the evidence on which they are based interrogated. In reading, this plays out by using knowledge of other texts and of the world to interrogate claims made in a text as it is read. Values and practices related to the scrutiny and interrogation of knowledge claims can be modeled in home based Discourses. An adult disputing aloud claims made in a newspaper article as she reads models the disposition and practice of interrogation. A child born into a home where this occurs will be socialized into beliefs, values and practices around reading which are very different to those available to a child in which the only text is a Bible or some other religious book and where reading involves revering and remembering the ‘word’. Similar observations could also be made of writing. A child born into a home where acts of writing are valued and where writing is modeled as a way of making meaning (see, for example, Emig, 1977) is more likely to understand the kinds of writing privileged in the academy as part of everyday life rather than as ‘studying’. If we compare this with the experiences of a child born into a home where the only writing is of short text messages on a mobile telephone or of posting on Facebook, then it becomes possible to understand why many children and students write as they do in schools and universities. A shift in ways of writing will only occur when the values of the new context are internalized.

Language is clearly an element of primary Discourse. In understan-ding the role played by language, it is necessary to make a distinction

between a model of language as 'an instrument of communication' (Christie, 1985) and a model of language as a resource (ibid). A model of language as an instrument of communication sees language as a vehicle for transmitting ready made meanings. This view which, by and large, I would argue, serves as a commonsense view, sees meanings pre-existing their 'translation' into language which is then used to transmit them to others. In contrast to this view, a model of language as a resource, developed from the work of linguist Michael Halliday (1973, 1978, 1985) and held within the field now know as 'Systemic Functional Linguistics' sees language as a means of making meaning. From this perspective, language and meaning are inseparable with individuals making conscious choices about the forms of language they use based on their understanding of the social context in which the language is being used. Going back to the example of science related academic Discourses noted above, this would mean that that the form of the phrase '5 mls of the solution were titrated' results from conscious choices on the part of the language user, choices which are informed by an understanding of the context and its values – in this case the valuing of objectivity. Appropriate language use therefore comes back to mastery of the Discourse in which the language user wants to demonstrate mastery. A student may well have mastered the forms of language necessary to produce a passive construction, but the production of the form outside formal language classes is dependent on a link being made to the values which sustain its use and, ultimately, to the internalization of those values.

Social accounts and South Africa

In South Africa, apartheid ensured that generations of black people were denied anything other than the most elementary education. This was thanks to beliefs such as those of prime minister Hendrik Verwoed that:

> . . . [t]here is no place for the Bantu in the European community above the level of certain forms of labour . . . What is the use of teaching the Bantu child mathematics when it cannot use it in practice? That is quite absurd. Education must train people in accordance with their opportunities in life, according to the sphere in which they live (in Clark & Worger, 2004, p. 48).

Although nearly twenty years have passed since the end of apartheid, the impact of the denial of education to black social groups continues to manifest itself. Since 1994, a black middle class has emerged and, as this paper has described, larger numbers of young black people have managed to access higher education. However, the size of this educated group is small in comparison to the total number of black people in the country given that black participation rates are so low.

Apartheid also impacted on social groups in other ways thanks to the way the labour was structured. Apartheid ideology imagined black families living in 'bantustans' or 'homelands' with black men traveling to work in the mining and other industries and black women performing menial domestic and other work in white urban areas. In order to find work, many black men and women were forced to leave their children with grandparents and other members of an extended family. As a result, it was not unusual to find black children growing up in rural areas although their parents had gained permission to travel to the cities and other parts of the country to work. To a large extent, this system continues today. Many children continue to be raised by grandparents or other guardians while their parents work elsewhere. This can also be the case where parents have managed to achieve higher levels of education. The 'wash back' effect of education on younger generations is thus affected by apartheid practices and children continue to live in homes where books are rare and the sort of practices which prepare them for formal schooling are not evident in spite of the fact that their own parents have managed to achieve some education.

In addition to all this, schooling available to most black social groups since the end of apartheid has not improved. Shortages of teachers, poor buildings and the failure to procure text books and stationery add to poor school management which sees high levels of absenteeism amongst both teachers and learners. When the impact of ill-managed attempts at curriculum change (see, for example, Jansen, 2012) is added to this, then the chances of a black child being able to access schooling which will allow her to acquire the secondary Discourses which will later facilitate the acquisition of academic Discourses are minimal.

Even where black children are able to access better-resourced, formerly white schools, the extent to which the hours spent at school are sufficient to allow learners to master secondary elevated Discourses is

debatable, especially without reinforcement at home. Moreover, as Geisler (1994) argues, the extent to which schools, regardless of quality, induct learners into the ways of reading and writing valued in the academy is also questionable largely because of the views of knowledge privileged in schooling. Schools are essentially consumers of knowledge whereas universities produce it. This fundamental difference gives rise to different reading and writing practices.

Geisler (ibid), for example, cites research which compares the number of 'hedges' (or phrases such as 'may', 'might', 'possibly' and so on indicating the tentative nature of a claim) in an academic text with those in a school text book on the same subject written by the same author. The school text book contained very few hedges with the result that knowledge was presented as seamless and uncontestable and that learners did not learn to look for the 'cracks' in the text which could be prised open in order for the uncertainty to be interrogated. Reading practices associated with text books (prompted by the texts themselves) can thus be understood as focusing on learning as accepting rather than on learning as a process of questioning typically associated with academic contexts.

With regard to language, English and Afrikaans, the two academic languages in the country, function as an additional language for the majority of South Africans although it is used very widely across the country. All children will learn one or both of these languages in school as one of the two languages is used as the language of instruction in schools. Although, in practice, the indigenous African languages are used extensively in schooling, those learners who access higher education all require a pass in the school leaving examinations.

In practice, students whose home language is not English or Afrikaans and who have gained places at universities, do all have some sort of mastery of the additional language. In the case of English, most would also have been exposed to the language thanks to popular culture. Several national television channels and many radio stations use English. English is the language of most newspapers and magazines and so on. Social accounts of learning would argue, therefore, that what is often cited as a 'second language problem' in higher education is actually a matter of students making choices for language use based on contexts other than the academic contexts in which they now find them-

mselves (see Boughey, 2005a, 2005b, for examples).

Social accounts of learning along with considerations of society since apartheid allows us to begin to understand why black students fare so badly in South African higher education without resorting to the attribution of inherent deficiencies. Even more significantly, they allow us to see how apartheid continues to impact on the chances of some individuals nearly twenty years after its official demise thanks to the way it structured society.

A way forward?

Earlier in this paper, the dominance of accounts attributing success in South African higher education to factors inherent to the individual or to the acquisition of various 'skills' were noted. Social accounts not only allow us an alternative to understanding failure as due to deficiencies but also question the existence of sets of apolitical, asocial, apolitical skills by positing instead an understanding of learning related practices which support different kinds of learning. This shift has important implications for practice.

As long ago as 1994, and in the context of policy development which would change the higher education landscape, Morrow (1993) was making a distinction between the provision of 'formal access' to higher education (i.e. making it possible for students to register in universities and other institutions of higher learning) and the 'epistemological access' (or access to the ways of knowing which sustain the academy) necessary for success.

The idea of needing to provide epistemological access has been taken up within South African Academic Development, the movement charged with improving teaching and learning in higher education, over the years. A number of analyses of South African Academic Development work (see, for example, Volbrecht & Boughey, 2004; Boughey, 2005a, Boughey, 2012) have shown, however, how support for black students has typically been provided outside the mainstream curriculum in the form of additional courses and tutorials which privilege the autonomous accounts of learning described above. In spite of enormous efforts on the part of those working in the movement over the years, little appears to have been achieved in promoting success for black students. At the

same time, little questioning of the theory being used to inform interventions has occurred.

The need to engage with globalization and to produce the knowledge workers privileged in discourses privileging it has resulted in attempts to manage teaching and learning more efficiently at a national level. The White Paper on Higher Education (Department of Education, 2007) identified a number of levers intended to 'transform' the higher education system. One of the most important of these levers has been funding with the result that the state subsidy for higher education has been reconfigured to privilege 'throughput', or the rate at which students proceed through their studies, and 'outputs' in the form of student graduations. A second lever has involved the establishment of a national quality assurance system focusing on institutional audits and programme accreditation.

Unsurprisingly, there has been a response to these levers at institutional level with universities appointing key individuals to manage teaching and learning. The prevalence of positions such as Deputy Vice Chancellor, Teaching and Learning or Dean, Teaching and Learning in South African universities (evident in a perusal of institutio-nal websites) speaks to the belief that highly placed appointments can make a difference. At the same time, organizational structures such as Teaching and Learning Committees or Programme Committees have been developed alongside a plethora of policies and strategies on teaching and learning (as a scan of institutional websites will also reveal).

The dominance of autonomous accounts of learning has been stressed throughout this paper. Recent research (Boughey, 2009, 2010; Boughey & McKenna, 2011a, 2011b) has shown that these continue to be drawn upon by those responsible for managing teaching and learning. Even more significantly, and following Haggis (2003) the same research shows how social accounts are appropriated into autonomous accounts. The constructs of 'deep' and 'surface' approaches to learning, for example, derived from phenomenological research conducted by the likes of Marton & Saljo (1976) and Entwistle (1984) which acknowledge the way social contexts impact on the approaches students take to their learning have been reconstructed as 'deep' and 'surface' learning. In a similar vein, students become 'surface learners' – o r indi-

viduals who inherently learn through remembering rather than by analyzing and understanding (see Haggis, ibid).

As long as key agents, policies and organizational structures continue to draw on dominant autonomous accounts of learning, it is unlikely that the 'educational strategies' called for by Scott et al. (2007) to remediate the figures resulting from their analysis of the cohort of students entering South African universities in the year 2000 will achieve any more than what has been achieved in by those working in the Academic Development movement over the past twenty or so years. What is needed is a rethinking, a re-understanding of why black students fail and a re-envisioning of strategies on the basis of that thinking.

The question of what is needed to prompt such a process given the resilience of dominant understandings remains to be answered.

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Notes

[1] The apartheid state distinguished between White, African, Indian and 'Coloured' social groups, with Africans bearing the brunt of discrimination. This categorization was denied by the majority of those involved in the liberation movement who tended to refer only to 'black' and 'white' South Africans as all black citizens were understood to be united in a common struggle. Since 1994, however, the new government has attempted to track social change by continuing to collect data according to the social categories of apartheid although no discrimination is intended by this. This paper draws on the categories of 'African', 'Indian', 'Coloured' and 'White' where disaggregation of published data already draws on these distinctions. Elsewhere, it uses the generic terms of 'black' and 'white'.

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