

‘More or less democracy?’ The responses of Grade 9 pupils to a survey conducted at the time of the fourth democratic election in South Africa

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Abstract: Five years ago at the first Heimet conference I presented a paper which I entitled, ‘*What do they make of 10 years of democracy?*’ *Researching the identity and skills of Grade 9 history pupils in Cape Town schools* (Siebörger 2005).

The fourth democratic parliamentary and provincial election in April 2009 provided an opportunity to repeat portions of the survey I conducted then, and to re-test some the historical skills which I had sought to identify in what was then the about-to-be-introduced new schools history curriculum.

The paper compares the responses of the 2009 Grade 9s to those of 2004 and attempts an analysis of the skills involved in interpreting the election posters, treated as historical sources.

1 Foreword

Five years on from 2004 this year’s election presented an appealing opportunity to repeat the questionnaire survey research I had done before. It would, hopefully, show what this year’s Grade 9s thought about the election and give a glimmer of insight into the almost completely unresearched progress of Revised National Curriculum Statement (RNCS) History, first introduced in Grade 9 in 2006 (Department of Education 2002).

2 The schools

The schools for the 2004 survey were self-selected as I was interested both to know more about the opinions of the pupils at the schools where my PGCE students were doing their school experience and to involve the students themselves in the research. The same approach was taken this year. In both cases it was a sample of eight schools. One school was included in both samples, but apart from that the composition of the schools was completely different. In contrast to 2004, when the majority of pupils were white, the sample resembled the demographics of Cape Town and the Western Cape¹ much more closely, see Table 1. There were also far fewer middle, upper middle and upper class schools.²

Table 1. Key information
2004 n=236
2009 n=290

Age:	2004	2009	Gender:	2004	2009	Race:	2004	2009
14:	62%	42%	Female:	43%	63%	African:	7%	28%
15:	27%	48%	Male:	56%	37%	Coloured:	26%	37%
						Indian:	2%	2%
						White:	46%	5%
					Don’t use race labels / not disclosed:		18%	27%

Pupils were asked the same personal information about gender, age, race, religion, interest in current events and news, interest in political parties and politics, interest in history, and ‘Where would you like to live after you have left home?’ as before.

The increase in the average age of the sample reflects the increase in the numbers of African and coloured pupils, who might have started school later and are more likely to have repeated years than their white counterparts. The gender discrepancies are in part explained by the fact that there were two boys-only schools in the 2004 sample and none in 2009 (one girls-only school in both 2004 and 2009). There was also a preponderance of girls in the two private schools with sponsored pupils [Table 2] (a reflection of selection procedures?) and in 2006, 52% of Western Cape Grade 9s were girls (Department of Education 2006:2).

Pupils surveyed this year were more likely to elect not to identify themselves by race (27% vs. 18% in 2004). Almost all of these pupils were coloured or white. It is interesting to speculate on the reasons for this. Three suggestions come to mind: the tradition of opposition to racism and non-racist thinking is much stronger amongst coloured communities and in coloured schools (schools 14 and 16 [Table 2] in particular have a proud history of this); there is increasing resistance in white and coloured communities to using race identifiers which are perceived to discriminate against them in terms of affirmative action policies; and changing perceptions of South African society, discussed further below.

Table 2. 2009 Schools¹

School	n	% of sample	Type	Fees	Gender	% African	% Coloured	% White	% No labels
9	35	12	State	Low	Co-ed	9	72	0	19
10	37	13	Private	Sponsored	Co-ed	35	41	0	24
11	16	6	State	Low	Co-ed	56	25	0	19
12	21	7	Private	Very high	Girls	5	5	38	44
13	44	15	Private	Sponsored	Co-ed	84	0	0	16
14	42	14	State	Low	Co-ed	19	55	0	24
15	55	19	State	Mid/high	Co-ed	15	58	13	8
16	40	14	State	Low	Co-ed	8	20	0	72

The sample in each school represents those present at the time in a Grade 9 class the student was teaching (School 13 = two classes). Class-size is directly linked to the fees payable, as state schools are able to employ extra teachers from the fee income they receive³. By comparison, the schools in 2004 were categorised as three 'Very high, three 'High', one Mid/high' and one 'Mid' fee-paying schools.

3 The questionnaire

The first part of the questionnaire, which had been designed to test discernable patterns amongst Grade 9s in terms of how they identified with South Africa in general and the 2004 elections in particular was repeated in 2009, viz.:

Eight paired questions to be answered by four possible responses (*Yes; I think so; Not sure; No*). The questions were:

- Is South Africa is a better country than it was five years ago?*
- Do you think Apartheid has disappeared in South Africa?*
- Is it important for South Africans to support their national sports teams?*
- Do people get on well with each other in South Africa?*
- Do you feel proud of South Africa and what South Africans have done in the last five years?*
- Do most South Africans have the same feelings about what has happened in South Africa?*
- Do people of different races mix much in South Africa?*
- Do most South Africans support the flag and national anthem of the country?*

Pupils were then asked to place the eight important events in the previous five years in order of their importance to them:

Tsotsi wins foreign film Oscar.
SA won the Rugby world cup.
Xenophobic protests in 2008.

Eskom [national electricity utility] loadshedding in 2006.
SA host for 2010 World Cup.

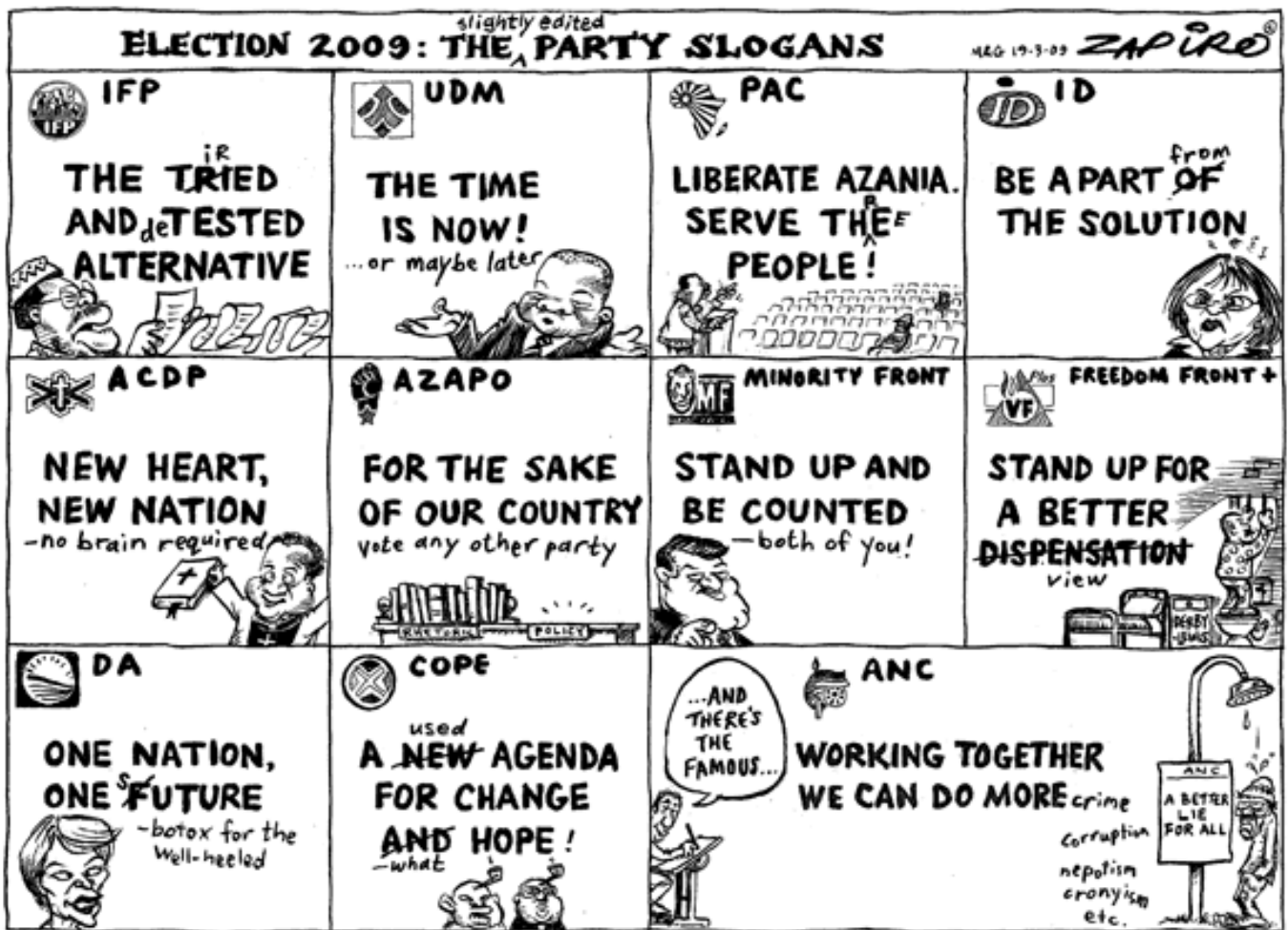
*Kgalema Motlanthe became President.
Charges dropped against Jacob Zuma.*

Soweto Gospel Choir and Ladysmith Black Mambazo win Grammy awards.

This was followed by the same three open response questions used in 2004:
What is the best thing about South Africa for you?
Apart from Nelson Mandela, who is the South African you most admire, and why?
If you could send a short message to the new President [Jacob Zuma was then the nominee, Thabo Mbeki in 2004] about the country, what would you say?

The second part of the questionnaire was based upon the following cartoon by South Africa's leading political cartoonist, Jonathan Shapiro ['Zapiro'].

Figure 1. The cartoon



Zapiro. *Mail and Guardian*, 20 March 2009. [Self-portrait in the final box.]

The cartoon provided, fortuitously, the opportunity to repeat two questions posed in 2004, while creating a fresh and appropriate context to test the Grade 9s understanding of the purpose of the satire. The two original questions required them to provide the full names of the best known six political parties from their initials and to choose the best explanation of four of the party slogans (ACDP, ID, IFP and ANC) from four alternatives supplied. Three new open-ended questions asked,

- Why did Zapiro write the words on the poster you chose?*
- What is funny about what Zapiro wrote on the poster you chose? (What is meant to make you laugh?)*
- Why do you think Zapiro made this cartoon of the 12 posters?*

4 South African identity

Much has changed from 2004. The survey then was tied to the 10th anniversary of the first democratic election and the context was in many ways a celebratory one. Now it is evident that the gloss has worn off and much of the ‘Madiba [Mandela] magic’ has been lost to the first generation not to have experienced Apartheid.

4.1 Identification with South Africa

In contrast to those who completed the first survey, the Grade 9s of 2009 are much less convinced that South Africa is a better country now than five years ago. Then 62% said ‘Yes’, South Africa was a better country with an additional 18% agreeing that they thought so. Now only 24% say ‘Yes’ and 22% think so. Slightly more than that (32%) were proud of what the country and South Africans had done in the past five years with the same number of pupils thinking so (vs. 66% in 2004). There was (as previously) very little variation in response by gender or religion, though a small, but perhaps indicative difference in race. White pupils were less likely to regard SA as a better country now, but somewhat more proud of its achievements.

The question ‘Where would you like to live after you have left home?’ revealed a decrease in the overall numbers of pupils who would like to remain in Cape Town (30% vs. 40%), which accords with this, though the figure for African pupils was 57%. Another significant exception was Muslim pupils who were more strongly tied to the city (48% vs. 35% for all coloured pupils). In all, 58% would prefer to emigrate, vs. 55% in 2004.

The most consistent result from the questionnaire was that on support for the flag and anthem of the country. No matter what variable one looks at, roughly 50% of the pupils agree that South Africans support the flag and anthem, while another 25% think so. This shows no change from 2004. The question it was paired with was whether it was important for South Africans to support their national sports teams and here, too, there was not much difference from 2004 (67% vs. 71%). These results confirm what one might have assumed given the national psyche, and their consistency gives credibility to comparisons with 2004.

So while support for the outward symbols of the country remains high, there is a profoundly less optimistic, and possibly more realistic view of the country’s economic, social and political progress since 2004.

With whom did they identify personally? The 2004 sample identified the actress Charlize Theron (20%), next after Nelson Mandela, Mark Shuttleworth - the ‘first African in space’ (10%), the President, Thabo Mbeki, and former President F.W. de Klerk (6% and 4%). This year there was a much wider spread of names (47), but less agreement about someone to admire. Top of the list was ‘no-one’ (16%), followed by Thabo Mbeki (11%), the present Western Cape Premier, Helen Zille (9%), Archbishop Desmond Tutu (7%). Jacob Zuma (the new President) received 3% of the suggestions, while the top sportsperson was swimmer Natalie du Toit (4%).

A similar number of pupils to 2004 chose the natural beauty of the country as the best thing about South Africa (a third) in 2009 as before, but far fewer described equality between people or human rights (26% vs. 42%) in the opened-ended ‘*What is the best thing about South Africa for you?*’ question, a finding consistent with greater disillusionment and their views about race relations. Sport, was, by contrast, more commonly mentioned than before, and there as a greater percentage of negative responses.

4.2 Apartheid past and present

Rebekah Kendal argues in a current news website debate, ‘Race matters in South Africa. It matters to our leaders. It matters to policy makers. And it matters to the man in the street. To deny this is both self-defeating and counter-productive’ (Kendal and Devine 2009). Clearly the 2009 Grade 9s agree.

There were four questions that probed the Grade 9s perceptions of relationships between people, two of which mentioned race or Apartheid specifically, paired with two that did not. There was a noticeable decline in the number of pupils who answered these questions positively in 2009 – roughly two-thirds of those who did in 2004, except for the question on whether most South Africans had the same feelings about what had happened in South Africa, which remained constant. African pupils were somewhat more

optimistic than their coloured counterparts (30% positive vs. 23%), a finding which can possibly be explained by the relatively greater change in opportunities open to them.

The position was, however reversed regarding whether people get on well in South Africa. In this case more 2009 coloured pupils gave a positive response than Africans (23% vs. 10%). Paired with it was whether people of different races mixed much in South Africa. This was a much more positively answered question (Yes = 47%), though still significantly lower than 2004 (60%). I commented in 2004 that, “it would be interesting to test [the question of whether races mixed much] in townships and less cosmopolitan areas”, which is effectively what the 2009 survey has done, revealing no significant divergence from 2004. There was no distinction between the views of pupils of different races, but, very unusually in this survey, a marked difference between boys (54%) and girls (42%), possibly influenced by greater involvement in sport?

The 2004 conclusion stands: “Whether most South Africans have the same feelings about what has happened revealed an awareness that, although people might mix with each other and get on fairly well, they have not had, and do not have, common experiences.”

4.3 South African politics

It was difficult for all to keep up with South African politics in the lead to the 2009 election, and even more difficult to disentangle the politics of the Western Cape – as hinted at by Zapiro’s cartoon. There were, thus, many factors that influenced the opinions of the Grade 9s in the survey. The ruling ANC had decided at its conference at Polokwane in December 2007 to change course, a decision which resulted in Thabo Mbeki being replaced as President in September 2008 by the stand-in Kgalema Motlanthe, preparing the way for Jacob Zuma to be nominated as the ANC Presidential candidate for the 2009 election. The fallout from these events resulted most conspicuously in the creation of a new splinter party, the Congress of the People (COPE) and a split in the Western Cape ANC, which contributed substantially to the ANC’s loss of the Western Cape provincial government in the election (to the Democratic Alliance (DA), under Helen Zille). Positively, the political atmosphere in the country prior to the election was one of expectation of change and, influenced by the Obama phenomenon, there was increased awareness and participation in the poll by young adults of all races. The questionnaire required some understanding of these developments for successful responses to the questions.

Pupils were asked to rank the most important events in the past five years. In 2004, ranking events from the previous 10 years, 78% had placed the transformational events (Mandela becoming president and the new constitution) at the top of their lists. Of the 2009 respondents, 16% regarded Motlanthe and Zuma as most significant, and 64% sport (46% 2010 FIFA World Cup and 18% 2007 Rugby World victory), a complete reversal of 2004, but predictable given the nature of the political changes and impact of the sporting ones. This figure was significantly higher among white and coloured pupils. The 16% who chose Eskom loadshedding [widespread power failures early in 2008] exercised a protest vote against recurrent infrastructural breakdowns.

Contrary to this tendency, however, the pupils revealed more interest in politics and political parties and current events and news than their counterparts in 2004. 18% (vs. 10% in 2004) indicated ‘a lot’ of interest in current events and 12% (vs. 7%) in politics. Corresponding figures for ‘medium’ interest were also consistently higher, viz., 48% (vs. 47%) and 34% (vs. 17%), confirming the assumption that there would be greater interest in the events surrounding the 2009 election than in (Thabo Mbeki’s re-election) in 2004. There is, in addition, a consistent pattern that those who showed greater interest in these aspects displayed greater interest and more ability at other items in the questionnaire.

The open ended short messages to the President tended to be just that. The bulk were brief sentences, not as conscientiously completed as in 2004 (possibly reflecting the higher number of English second language writers), but the themes of their messages were similar. Surprisingly, perhaps, there were only 11% (vs. 20%) concerned about poverty and housing and only a single message about HIV/Aids. The highest number of messages were of a negative personal nature – 32%, similar positive messages amounting to 18%, in contrast to the 22% in 2004, which represented the highest category then. A new theme, consistent with the level of negativism found in other sections of the questionnaire was that 9% wrote messages about corruption in government.

Surprising, given the higher levels of interest in politics, was the markedly worse performance of the 2009 Grade 9s on the question of what the party initials stand for, where only 23% could give the correct party names for all six initials, and a further 23% had fewer than three correct. The 2004 sample had, by comparison, 47% all correct and 18% with one error only. Given the nature of the errors, an assumption can be made that the majority of the pupils were not interested in knowing the full names of the parties and were content with identifying them by initial, which might also have been influenced by their level of fluency in English.⁴ Acronyms are also very widely used in common parlance.

5. History skills

As in 2004, an aim of the questionnaire was to be able to make observations on the skills displayed in the survey relative to the history curriculum itself. In the 2009 survey it was specifically the ability to *analyse the information in the sources [works with sources]*, using the cartoon as a source.

There was a small increase in the number of pupils who indicated that they that they were interested in history 'a lot', 27%, vs. 20%.

The first part of this section was to identify the best explanation of the original slogans on four of the 12 posters from four possibilities provided, an exact repetition of the 2004 exercise. By comparison, for three of the posters the majority identified the best explanation in 2009 (vs. two in 2004) and the average percentage of correct responses was marginally higher, 38%, vs. 35%. Given the relative differences in social class and linguistic ability in English, it is significant that the 2009 correct responses are not lower than those of 2004. A closer analysis of the four items shows that only in one poster, that of the IFP, was there a very significant misinterpretation of the slogan, which was also the case in 2004. In the other three 73%, 73% and 61% of pupils chose the best or second best explanation. The IFP slogan, 'A tried and tested alternative' was interpreted as 'a successful party' by the majority, who failed to consider the importance of the word 'alternative'. Pupils who indicated a strong interest in history had a slightly higher rate of correct responses than others.

The open-ended response questions, were however, far more poorly completed, with very few pupils in each school writing even brief correct responses to *all three* of the questions, though approximately two-thirds of the answers to each question were judged coherent responses by the PGCE students who coded them. Typical of these answers were:

Why did Zapiro write the words on the poster you chose?

- To make people laugh.
- Because eva since dey took over there has been nothing bt crime & corruption because their leader is not setting a good example if he's corrupt wot do u expect from hiz workers?
- Beacause Zapiro knows that there is no party that is wrong they are all equal.
- For it to be attractive and for them to say their say.
- Because you can vote any other party you want to vote and the words (for the sake of our country vote any other party tell us that.
- Because if they gonna vote ANC then rape is gonna be legal.
- Probably to add humour to the posters.

What is funny about what Zapiro wrote on the poster you chose? (What is meant to make you laugh?)

- Changing the meanings of the slogans.
- (Lol) da fact dat he's writing wotz happening in reality. And why wud suml wanna vote for a prisioner?
- The way Zapiro draw pictures when they talk.
- He draws the people funny and leaves funny comments.
- There's nothing to laugh about because the words he wrote is true you can vote any other party you like.
- A better life for all.
- It's actually trying to get the worst out of the parties. It's using negative words, what they think it actually is.

Why do you think Zapiro made this cartoon of the 12 posters?

- To make a cartoon about politics.
- He made this cartoon because the ANC is part of the parties that are elected to take part in the elections and be voted for.
- because Zapiro is advertising those posters.
- Because he doesn't leave out any other parties otherwise they would think his races [racist].
- So that the people can know he don't care what party you vote just as long as you vote.
- because that's what the posters mean.
- To sell the newspaper. And, either trying to tell us, more like, what we don't know about the parties, actually. (Because everyone has a dark side to them.)

There were no significant differences in performance between schools, stated interest in current events, politics or history, nor between race categories (the number of pupils identified as whites in the sample is too small for comparison, but their answers were on average much better than others) in the first two questions. Answers to the last question were better done by those with strong interests in politics and history (as one would expect) and by girls.

6. Tentative conclusions

This paper is a first attempt and I would welcome questions and discussions about the results of the survey, which could open queries and debates concerning it.

The sections of the survey on South African identity reveal many contradictions. The responses of the pupils surveyed show much in common with their counterparts in 2004, despite the big contrast in race, gender and class distinctions. This is a key finding, which is counterintuitive in many ways.

But there are also some clearly defined differences. 2009 Grade 9s value similar things about South Africa but are more pessimistic about its government and politics, despite more interested in current events, politics and history. They perceive that Apartheid is worse, if anything, than it was five years ago and are not positive about whether most South Africans get on well with each other or have the same feelings about what has happened in South Africa, though these categorisations are not necessarily racial, and might represent increased levels of crime and threats to personal security. They are less likely, however, to foreground their own immediate problems and more likely blame politicians personally, and have very little idea of whom to turn to as a role model.

In the sections of the survey on history, it is encouraging that there are signs that, based on the interpretation of political slogans, that the 2009 sample is somewhat better than the 2004 sample, contrary to what might have been expected. But they are certainly no better at answering the political acronyms or the open-ended questions. It would require further research to establish what the reasons for the latter are. They might include inability to understand what the questions were asking, poor literacy levels and writing skills, lack of familiarity with cartoons as historical sources (a traditional staple of the external Grade 12 examinations, but possibly not analysed much in Grade 9), inability to operate at higher levels of abstraction. It is difficult to come to any conclusion about the success of the history curriculum as the written responses were inconsistent across all the variables measured.

Is democracy working in South Africa? The engagement of the majority of pupils with the questionnaire in what was plainly an honest and sincere way and the interest displayed by many in its issues, is a sign that elements of South African democracy are still very healthy. It is concerning, however, that the understanding and ability needed to sustain democratic institutions in the long term is questionable. It may be argued that a 'more or less' democracy becomes in the end no democracy at all.

Notes

1. Race labels are still widely used in South Africa for equity purposes and are not regarded as pejorative when used in this way. Pupils and students are required to state their race when registering at an educational institution. 2001 Census figures for Cape Town were 2.9 million people, 48% of whom were coloured (mixed race), 31% African, and 19% white. 48% spoke Afrikaans at home, 28% Xhosa and 27% English.
2. Illustrative labels only, not labels the schools would use themselves, and not labels in common usage.

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3. Although not reflected here, there are also many non-fee paying schools (the lowest stratum) and schools with 'very low' fees.
 4. In 2004 there was a significant difference found between boys (who were better) and girls on this item. There was no significant difference in the 2009 survey.

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