

The 11th Tsietsi Mashini Lecture

50 Years Later

What does the Soweto Uprising mean for education struggles today?

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Morris Isaacson High School

Soweto



A brief reminder

- On 16 June 1976, almost to the day, thousands of students walked out of schools and homes in Soweto (the numbers vary by source, 5000 to 10000) and converged on Orlando Stadium; at least that was the plan for they never got there
- The immediate issue was the 50/50 policy of the apartheid government that would extend the use of Afrikaans as the medium of instruction in Black urban schools
- This policy directive made absolutely no sense outside of the arrogance of Afrikaner nationalist politics that would willfully impose Afrikaans on Blacks when most students did not understand the language and most teachers could not teach in the language
- It was, however, a decision that would be the lightening spark that set aflame a national protest movement (alongside the Durban strikes of 1973) that ended a long period of relative quiet in the resistance since the murder of 69 protestors in Sharpeville in 1960
- It was also a decision that would forever embitter many Black South Africans to the possibility of an acceptance of Afrikaans in everyday usage—something many Afrikaans-speaking white South Africans to this day simply cannot understand
- Soweto 1976 is today known as a student protest movement that branched out across the country and energized student struggles on a scale that South Africa had not witnessed through centuries of colonialism and apartheid
- It is not hyperbole to suggest that the Soweto Uprising in the mid-70s was one of the movements that would sustain protests across sectors that would eventually contribute to the fall of apartheid

- It is not my goal to recollect the specific events of June/July 1976, the most intense movement of the revolt for that has been done superbly in a significant number of books (about 12, apart from journal articles), and which I drew on for today's Lecture, but mention two of the best.
- Best because of the critical focus not on authorial opinion but on deft treatments of student and teacher recollections and memories of the event

Sifiso Ndlovu, *The Soweto Uprisings: Counter-memories of June 1976* (1998, 2017)

Noor Nieftagodein, *The Soweto Uprising* (2014, 2026)

I gratefully acknowledge drawing mainly on these two sources in my historical recap of the SU in this presentation

- It is important to remember that the SU did not emerge out of nowhere; there were for some time grievances expressed against the attempt to extend Afrikaans across the curriculum---already in March of 1976 students (Form 1 and II) at Phefeni Junior Secondary School convened afternoon classes to discuss their response to the state's Afrikaans plan (Ndlovu).
- The point is: nobody listened to the concerns and complaints of students, parents and teachers---until it was too late.
- It is the 1970s and now, with millions of Black students in schools for the first time in history, and inspired by Black Consciousness, students rose to protest a white minority government making decisions about the language of instruction for a Black majority populace.
- Hundreds of students died (23, 176, 575, 700 depending on whose counting) and thousands more were injured (4000 plus). Hector

Pietersen was shot and killed about the same time as Hastings Ndlovu but the brilliant photography of Sam Nzima left an indelible impression on our minds to this day as Hector's limp body was carried by a comrade alongside a terrified Antoinette Sithole

- Those murders on and after June 16 remain a wound that still sits at the heart of the South African body politic and a memory that cannot and will not be erased.
- It is, in this regard, a real sadness that the revised history curriculum (on which we were called to comment) pays such flimsy attention to the role of the SU in shaping the course of South Africa's path to democracy in the late 20th century:
- With only 3 explicit mentions of the SU in the NSC statement for Grades 7-9 and even less (2) in Grades 11-12, we are left with this vacuous statement:

"While there was early resistance against Bantu education from the moment of its inception, the 16 June 1976 Soweto students' uprising is perhaps the most well-known resistance to the system"

Perhaps?

"This system of education was reformed over time, the racially segregated schooling remained in place until the mid-1990s."

All by itself?

The mid-1990s? May I ask, are your public schools in Soweto now racially integrated?

... study either Soweto 1976 or Cape Town 1976 or Durban 1976 or Limpopo 1976

These are options? How do you study Limpopo without reference to the roots of the revolt in Soweto?

The date for commentary might have passed but I urge those in this audience and listening in on the link to demand a more extensive and respectful account of the SU than the flimsy content suggested.

I will not rehearse the story of this historic uprising (I am not a historian) but rather draw out its implications for education struggles in the present.

What are the seven most important lessons of the SU for South African education and politics today?

1. The **agency of students** in the face of repression (they did not count themselves as passive observers in a crisis. Start where you are, use what you have, do what you can—Arthur Ashe)
2. The **principled opposition** of the student movement (not violent, optimistic, focused, seeking solutions)---that changed only when it was faced by the racist brutality of police violence
3. The **broad-based coalition** drawing in many different groups around a single purpose (SASM, other groups, before there was the SSRC; workers, parents, students in a coalition represented in the NECC)
4. The **personal sacrifices** made even when it hurt you most (not writing exams) or could cost you your life (this week a South African became a trillionaire, personal accumulation of insane wealth vs sacrificial giving)
5. The development of a **broad pan Africanism** in the course of the struggle (the celebration of the fall of Portuguese colonialism in Mozambique and Angola, the solidarities of frontline states with the liberation movements, the welcoming of South African students into exile despite the costs to regional governments). This is at odds with the violent xenophobia now engulfing South Africa that targets Black Africans who look like us; this must stop now.
6. The **singling out of education** (not waterworks or public enterprises or mining) as the basis for our freedom from oppression then and now. I still do not know of any other means for escaping poverty (of the body, the mind and the spirit) than a good quality education.

7. The importance in these times of **youth leadership** in times of crisis. I wish to recognize and honor Don Tietsie Mashini for his enormous sacrifice that enables us to live and learn in freedom; he put up his hand, he fled into exile and made the ultimate sacrifice.

May Tsietsi's spirit and those of the thousands who sacrificed their lives for our freedom continue to live among us and inspire us to continue the struggle for the many still left behind in unequal schools and by a government that again risks not listening to the demands for equality of outcomes

Jonathan D Jansen

Stellenbosch University

Q and A

