

**“The man who pulled up the barbed wire and planted geraniums”**

**- ALAN PATON's role as Principal of Diepkloof Reformatory, and  
contribution to a Critical Pedagogy**

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Abstract

Alan Paton, apart from being a celebrated writer, was an educator par excellence. He was a noted educationist, having taught in Ixopo, then at Pietermaritzburg College, before he entered reformatory work, becoming the principal of Diepkloof Reformatory School in 1935. He displayed a more enlightened outlook to his work and was known as the “man who pulled up barbed wire fences and planted geraniums.” He was able to infuse a new dimension of humanity and compassionate pedagogy at a time when an authoritarian image of the principal and teacher held sway. In this paper I shall begin by presenting a descriptive narrative of Paton's experiences as Principal at Diepkloof Reformatory, drawing from his own writing on the subject. I will then reflect critically on how Paton's implicit pedagogic style was a pedagogy of the oppressed - a pedagogy of hope.

## **DIEPKLOOF**

### *First Days at Diepkloof*

Alan Paton is a teacher of mathematics and science at Ixopo High School and Maritzburg College. He then applies for a post at a reformatory. He is just recovering from an illness and is looking for a change of scene. He applies for four principalships – Tokai White, Tokai Coloured, Houtpoort White and Diepkloof African. He writes to Mr J H Hofmeyer, then Minister of Education, whose advice is that he [Paton] apply for all four principalships. As Alan Paton remembers, “As for Diepkloof African, he had been to see it himself, and he wrote, ‘It is hard to know what can be done with it.’ I therefore applied for all four principalships, hoping that I would not get Diepkloof.” [Paton 1990: 8]

Although his wife Dorrie is distressed at the appointment – “What do you know about reformatories? What do you know about African delinquents?” she said – Paton is excited at the prospect: “At the age of thirty-two I was being given the chance of turning a prison into a school, I was being given a school of my own.” [9]

Paton takes office, and describes what he sees: “July 1935. My first month at Diepkloof Reformatory, as foul a place as ever I saw. Four hundred boys were housed in wood-and-iron building set round a hollow square, one side of which was used for administration. Round the entire block, and about twenty feet from

it, ran a thirteen-foot-high barbed-wire fence, inclining at an angle towards the building.” [9]

Routinely counting the number of boys present becomes a ritual. “The opening of the cells preceded the first count of the day. This business of the count was probably the most important in the entire routine of managing a custodial institution... an iron discipline was exercised...” [11]

Yet, in spite of this bleakness and aridity Paton is moved to his very soul at the boys’ singing. “The boys sang a hymn, and the beauty of it, and the earnestness and innocence and reverence of those four hundred delinquent voices, captured me then and held me captive for thirteen years.” [9] This is an unsettling incongruity. Surely, Paton surmises, such singing reflects a side of the boys that is suppressed, a side that is longing to emerge from the stultification of the reformatory and of their circumscribed lives, a longing to be valued and loved. These captive boys show in their singing their longing to be free and whole.

Paton is conscious of the extreme regimentation of the reformatory. He realizes that this is the entrenched system of the institution. “These counting, these locked doors, these double gates, and the high fence that ran round the whole block, had naturally one purpose and one only, and that was to prevent the inmates from running away. How was this one purpose to be reconciled with, or at least to operate alongside of, an educational and reformatory purpose?” [12]

The boys deferential attitude to him irks him and he realizes that this was accorded to the office of the principal: "I was saluted and stamped at continuously. I was treated as though I were an emperor of some immense domain... The respect showed to me was excessive. This had nothing to do with my character or personality, but was paid to my office. It was in fact the tradition of prisons. When I visited a span, supervisor and boys would come to attention with military precision. The parade was in fact an important instrument of order and discipline..." [12, 13].

Faced with such bleak prospects, such a perversion of true education, Paton knows instinctively that change is demanded. The challenge is to change the "prison" into a school in all the positive connotations that the word "school" signifies. Paton knows instinctively that he is to be that instrument of change, and given the wider context of the times he sets about it quite audaciously.

### *Experiment in Freedom*

Paton begins by making simple but startling changes in the enclosed world of the reformatory. He works slowly but progressively in lifting the various restrictions that weigh heavily on the institution.

Firstly, the practice in the reformatory of locking the dormitories at night and leaving two buckets as a latrine available for the boys' use must be addressed.

The stench in the morning is unbearable! Paton solves the problem by allowing the boys access to the lavatories. "I decided not to lock the dormitories at night, so that the boys could visit the lavatories when the need arose. I also decided that all the dormitories would not be opened at once, but that they would be opened at the rate of one each week" [16].

Paton shows partiality to the little boys. He realizes that one hundred are, in fact, children, and are in the reformatory for the pettiest of crimes. "These hundred small boys had a humanizing effect on this grim place. Some of them if I came near to them on the parade would be conscious that the great meneer had taken notice of their existence. Sometimes I would stand still by one of them, usually one of the very smallest. Sometimes I would tweak his ear, and he would give me a brief smile of acknowledgement and frown with still greater concentration. It was as though I had tweaked the ear of the whole reformatory. These were the irrefutable proofs that the aim of the reformatory was not punitive. But quite apart from that, they were to many the only signs of affection they had ever known." [16] The importance of human touch in the parched context of the reformatory is appreciated by all the boys.

Paton then allows the younger boys a period when they could play in the Yard, with the proviso that they observe strict silence after that. "These younger boys were given the freedom to make a noise until a great silence was to be observed

by them. These small boys would play in the Yard, whistling and yelling and skylarking, delirious with their freedom.”[17]

He hopes that this would pave the way for the older boys to be given a measure of freedom. Paton sees clearly that the boys are the product of the social upheavals caused by apartheid. These older boys are considered a greater risk by the guards, boys “made hard and tough by the life and ways of Kliptown and Pimville and Orlando and Sophiatown, young men who could bludgeon watchmen and scale walls and kill those who stood in their way.” [17]. Paton realizes that there is only one way to “guard against such a possibility, and that was to create a strong arm of law and order inside the reformatory itself” [17].

Paton is clearly reversing the rules, working contrary to the iron-hold that is exerted on the boys. “I had come to Diepkloof believing that freedom was the supreme reformatory instrument.” [17] Of course this is not what the authorities believed and Paton takes calculated risks, implicitly trusting that the boys will not take advantage of their new freedoms and privileges.

His efforts bear fruit, and there is even a change in the very lexicon deployed to describe the place. “Gradually the appellation *die trunk* [the jail] fell into disuse and replaced by *die skool* [the school]. The department itself took similar action, and the warders now became supervisors, while the inmates became pupils. I,

who had come as Warden, now became the Principal” [ 20]. His primary desire to turn the reformatory into a school is being achieved.

Paton then announces that the older boys would be given tobacco and the younger one sweets. Tobacco had been forbidden, and this rule only led to its surreptitious and widespread use. Gradually the boys become less rigid and more amenable to discipline. The heartening outcome is that they remain within the routine of the institution and do not abscond. The boys are clearly gaining a different sense of their identity. Paton, however, sees the change as occurring within himself. “When I said good night and the boys went to their rooms to be counted I was aware that something had changed somewhere, perhaps only in myself. It seemed to me that many of the boys looked at us out of new eyes, almost as though they were astonished to find that we were human. For the first time I began to feel that my hope would be confirmed, that amongst these four hundred young offenders there was a willingness to give a reasonable obedience to a reasonable authority.” [ 21]

Paton is clearly affected by his life at Diepkloof, and he sees it as a great learning experience. “That was the beginning of our Diepkloof life, thirteen years of disappointment and achievement, of failure and success, of happiness and fulfillment, and of labours prodigious and now almost unbelievable, and an ever-deepening love of an institution and its four hundred wayward boys.” [21]

### *Final Transformations*

Paton works on his transformatory agenda by progressively making the institution less of a prison house. He moves to the next and final stage, of lifting some of the restrictions placed on the reformatory. “Freedom within custodial walls isn’t the real thing. How could one introduce freedom outside them?” That was the question that now exercised my mind. For I cling to the belief - which was at that time founded on faith – that you could not cultivate a sense of purpose and responsibility unless it were accompanied by physical freedom, and that the granting of physical freedom, would prove far less dangerous than one feared.” [23]

He is clearly taking a calculated risk, but is prepared for the possible consequences. He is prompted by his feeling that the reformatory is being run too much like a gaol. He develops a deep faith in the boys. “I could not foresee in 1935 that the consequence of increasing the amount of physical freedom would be to reduce absconding drastically, to change the atmosphere of the reformatory from one of grimness to one of industrious gaiety, and almost to eliminate the feelings of anxiety and tension. I was too deeply committed to see that the setbacks were only falterings in a ceaseless moving forward. I passed through periods of despair, and said [rather than prayed] to God, “Don’t You want this to happen? Because if You don’t want it to happen I am going back to a safer job” [28].

Paton is able to assess in six months the success of his attempts at transformation. “So the first six months of Diepkloof drew to their end. The atmosphere was changing. The closed dormitories were no longer there to reproach us. The morning stench had gone. Typhoid fever was going. Small boys did not any longer tremble when one approached them. The clean whitewashed walls were no longer sacrosanct; pictures could be painted on the dormitory walls.” [28]

The final act is to take down the barbed wire fence. This is as much a symbolic act as a physical one. A garden is made where the fence had been. “...I later became known as ‘The man who pulled up the barbed wire and planted geraniums...’” [28]. It is not surprising that the “gardens of Diepkloof became known for their beauty” [31].

Paton encourages these reforms to take place in a context where the boys are being trained in the value of manual labour. He encourages the Department to introduce workshop training in those occupations that were open to African boys at the time. “Most of these shops we built ourselves at first, out of wattle and daub, with thatch for the roof. We made our own shoes, tailored out own clothes, did our own tin-smithing. Other boys were trained in building and laundry work. About one hundred boys still worked on the farm, mostly from rural and agricultural areas, and another hundred were trained in nursery work and horticulture” [31].

This is clearly a story of faith in human nature, of showing a human face to authority and of tempering authority with love.

### **ALAN PATON AND CRITICAL PEDAGOGY**

It is illuminating to consider the ways in which Paton implemented principles of Critical Pedagogy in his role as principal at Diepkloof Reformatory. Critical Pedagogy was developed by Paulo Freire, a Brazilian educationalist who published his ground breaking book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, in 1970. He postulated that education should raise the awareness of students so that they become subjects, rather than objects of the world.

Critical pedagogy has concerned itself with the development of theories that explore the power dynamics in pedagogical relationships, and is discernible in the writings of Freire [1973], Giroux [1988], McLaren [1998], Shor [1980], Simon [1987], to name a few. This school of thought has focused on pedagogy as possibility, and has been concerned with developing a discourse of critical pedagogy that is sensitive to, inter alia, class and race variables and their concomitant power dynamics. In elucidating the direction of a pedagogy of possibility, Simon [1992] adds that it must include the ability to interrogate both social forms and their possible transformations, and be compatible with securing human diversity, securing compassionate justice and securing the renewal of life [Perumal, 2007: 42].

In all his interaction with his students Paton treated them as those who will show responsibility. Paton did not favour a rigid centralized system of authority. In his book, *Deschooling Society*, [ 1972], Ivan Illich, a foremost thinker in Critical Pedagogy, criticised modern education, which he saw as being devised primarily to allow for an authoritarian management of societies, and which inhibited rather than expanded learning opportunities for the mass of the people. He proposed instead decentralized, dis-established and multiple systems of learning, which would develop in pupils a critical and enquiring frame of mind [Hardiman 2002: 88].

Paton redefined the role of the principal [and teacher]. The role of the principal or headmaster as domineering and authoritarian was tacitly questioned. In *Critical Pedagogy* the role of the teacher as master is reconfigured. In their influential study of learning as a social practice, Lave and Wenger [1991: 94] argue that learning “depends upon decentring common notions of mastery and pedagogy... to take a decentred view of master-apprentice relations leads to an understanding that mastery resides not in the master but in the organization of the community of practice of which the master is part: the master as the locus of authority [in several senses] is after all as much a product of the conventional centred theory of learning as is the individual learner. Similarly a decentred view of the master as pedagogue moves the focus of analysis away from teaching and onto the intricate structuring of a community’s learning resources.” [Edwards and

Usher:73]. Paton had a tacit understanding of this and sought to develop an alternative community among pupils, who were no longer called “inmates”. Foucault, in *Discipline and Punish – The Birth of the Prison* [1975] was to engage in a stringent critique of all institutional life [prisons, schools, the military] that was based on premises of a technology of power, that wished to create “docile bodies” through strict regimentation, disciplinarianism, and penalty. He saw schools as part of the same “carceral system” that engaged in the assault on the corporeal.

Paton redefined spaces of learning. Lankshear et al [1996] argue that education as a modernist institution is characterized by the spaces of enclosure of the book, the classroom and the curriculum that work to enclose the meaning of experience. Here the learner’s task becomes one of extracting and representing a singular canonical meaning, and the teacher’s that of being the authority in terms of interpretation and accuracy [Edwards and Usher, 2000/2008: 54]. The reformatory may be defined as such a “space of enclosure” both literally and metaphorically. Paton worked towards redefining and re-choreographing the learning spaces of the institution of the reformatory by paradoxically seeing “freedom” as the instrument of change in the reformatory. Bringing down the barbed wire fences, and resisting the diminution of the institution to an arcane labyrinth of rules and codes was the logical thing to do. While the boys were taught specific skills, he saw their real education as lying in a process that restored humanity to both learner and teacher. Henri Lefebvre has developed a

theory of social space that shows how power is exercised in and through space, resulting in the centre/periphery divide [see Lefebvre 1991; Karlsson 2002].

Paton tacitly upsets this dichotomy. The learners in Paton's institution were marginalized and on the fringes of society. Paton gives new meaning to the concept of Border pedagogy that would become an intrinsic part of Critical Pedagogy. The question of location, and spatial metaphors that have come to the fore in discussions of pedagogy, are relevant here. Giroux's [1992] notion of border pedagogy has become an important part of the discourse on Critical Pedagogy. Paton realized that the reformatory was at the fringe of society and reflected the worst effects of apartheid.

Paton goes to the reformatory under duress. He had hoped that he would not be appointed as principal and almost went there as a reluctant outsider. The institution embodies all the worst effects of apartheid education of its time. bell hooks [1990], following Freire [1986], has described such a space as "a site of radical possibility, a space of resistance" [151]. Paton is able to identify the power of relationships that define his identity. And having named them, he could also begin to resist the oppressive roles he was being assigned. Listening to his own voice rather than listening only to the external scripts of the powers that be, he had come to critique others' expectations for him rather than accommodating them [Richtie and Wilson, p 83].

Paton understood implicitly the nurturing role that he has been entrusted with. Nel Noddings [ 1984] asserts the important distinction between legalistic relationships of authority and responsibility and relationships based on an “ethic of care”. In *Teaching to Transgress* [1994] bell hooks describes how such relationships in her own education in all-Black schools in the South enabled her to thrive. Her teachers knew the students, their life circumstances, and their families. Their caring relationships with students inspired and supported learning in the face of the racist culture around them. hooks [1994] argues that relationships, pleasure, excitement, and even love must not be feared or banned from classrooms but must be recognized as vital to learning. She says that, “To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin” [in Ritchie and Wilson 85-86]. As Noddings’ critics point out, even these caring relationships can become paternalistic and condescending, especially across gender differences and differences in authority, with the caring participant patronizing or exploiting the less powerful member of the relationships. Despite the risks, these interpersonal relationships are important to personal and professional development [ Ritchie and Wilson, 86].

And the exposure of these gaps, Freire [1986] points out, becomes possible at the moment when the individual begins to name her own experience, to interpret it in relationship to wider cultural /political narratives. This process makes

possible the recognition that cultural narratives about who one ought to be and how one might live are not monolithic or homogenous. When individuals begin to see the multiple and often conflicting nature of those narratives, it becomes possible to hold them to scrutiny to resist them and to break their hold over us [ Ritchie and Wilson, 87-88].

## **CONCLUSION**

Paton lived in an era before Critical Pedagogy as espoused by Paulo Freire was inaugurated. But in his approach to his role as educator and Principal Paton showed the way in which a humanizing pedagogy might proceed. This is indeed a radical pedagogy of possibility, a pedagogy of hope, that Paton was practising in the arid years of the 1930's in South Africa, long before these became vogue words. His approach and his description of his experiences also shows that he was not controlled by any of the jargon of Critical Pedagogy. He was merely acting intuitively, guided by what it means to be a good human being. At a time when reformatories were the dumping grounds of the detritus of the apartheid system, Alan Paton, had the courage to unsettle its many shibboleths, systematically challenging its moral and ethical decreptitude, and addressing its "morbid symptoms". He did this not only by what he said and wrote but by his practice. To deal with the impact of the searing, highly-wrought experience of reformatory life Paton decided to go on an overseas trip. That he found his writer's voice during this sojourn shows the crucial, epiphanic role that the reformatory experience played in his life and thinking.

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