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What are the aims of the lessons on **role models**?

Teachers and pupils' understanding of the theme in South African comprehensive school classes.

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### **Abstract**

Role models was one of the themes for lessons in the Foundation Phase in the South African Revised National Curriculum Statement of 2002 (RNCS; Department of Education, 2002). The focus of the article is to discuss how teachers understood, interpreted and presented the theme to their pupils and how their pupils responded to it. The study is based on policy texts, observation of lessons and textbooks. Foucault's concepts of normalisation and normalising judgment and Connell's concepts of masculinity and sex roles are used to analyse results. The results of the study show similarities and differences in understanding and preferences of role models by teachers and pupils. While teachers emphasised officially known people as role models, some pupils considered family members and other people in their neighbourhood. Mandela was a favoured role model in most classes. Even if the theme of the lessons was role models, I argue that the covert agenda is normalising pupils to the existing dominant social norms of the society.

Keywords: lessons, masculinity, normalising, role models, South Africa

### **Introduction**

This study was done in 2009 in four schools in the Nelson Mandela Bay Metropolitan Municipality in South Africa. The theme of role models was taught in third grade classes in the whole country. The study was conducted in four third grade classes in four schools.

I considered that these schools represented different groups of people living in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa. Even though law in South Africa forbade racial divisions, in reality the change has been slow. From what I observed most people still live in segregated neighbourhoods and attended schools with people of similar racial groupings as those made under apartheid. Because of this visible presence of differences, I decided to take schools/classes mainly dominated by black, coloured or white pupils and one class with a mixed group of pupils.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Under apartheid the population of South Africa was divided by the colour of their skin into black, coloured, Indian/Asian and white. The Bantu population was classified as black; people born from parents of different races are called coloured; the Asians, mainly of Indian origin, who came to South Africa as labourers in the 1850s were classified as Indian/Asian, and the Europeans of different origins were classified as whites (Abraham, 2010).

In these classes, third grade pupils dealt with the theme of role models as a part of their life orientation lesson. The theme was given in the Revised National Curriculum Statement (RNCS) and the textual resources to teach it were given in different textbooks. According to the curriculum, pupils in the third grade should be able to talk about role models (Department of Education, 2002).

### **The aims of the study and research question**

The study aims to find out the way teachers understand, interpret and present to their pupils what is written in the curriculum about role models. The study also looks closely at the teachers' and pupils' descriptions of role models, their relevance for schools and society at large.

The questions I will attempt to answer through this study are: how do teachers understand, interpret and present texts on the theme; whom do teachers and pupils consider as role models; is there a common understanding of role models by teachers and pupils; and what is the relevance of the theme for different stakeholders?

### **The concept of role models and what is not said about it**

There could be different understandings of the concept of role models. An article by Pleiss & Feldhusen defines role models as follows:

Role models are generally defined as adults who are worthy of imitation in some area of life. It is important to note, however, that the term role model is often used in both the mentorship literature and in the literature that deals with attachments to public figures such as heroes and heroines. In educational research the term seems at times to be a synonym for either type of figure, and at other times seems to be a way to describe relationships that fall somewhere in between. Depending on who the role models are, there may or may not be direct interaction between students and their role models. (Pleiss & Feldhusen, 1995, p. 163)

In addition to the above general definition different writers have given various aspects of role models. They are considered as prototypes for function and behaviour, for hard work, persevering through crises and disadvantage (McLean, 2004), as those who provide characters that will satisfy needs that develop and achieve goals as well as those whose lives and activities influence other people (Gibson, 2004).

What the different literature in the field and the teachers who gave lessons on the theme do not consider is what logic lies behind presenting it in this way. For a critical understanding of the theme, I would like to use Foucault's concepts of normality and normalising judgement. Connell's concepts of masculinity and sex roles will also be used to look more closely at the gender aspects of the study.

Foucault discusses the effect of institutions such as factories, schools, prisons and hospitals' role in the normalising process. He states that they are "binding the individual...in terms of particular norms" (Foucault, 1994, p. 78). He further discusses normalisation as follows:

In a sense, the power of normalization imposes homogeneity; but it individualizes by making it possible to measure gaps, to determine levels, to fix specialities and render the differences useful by fitting them one to another. It is easy to understand how the power of the norm functions within a system of formal equality, since within a homogeneity that is the rule, the norm introduces, as a useful imperative and as a result of measurement, all the shading of individual differences. (Foucault, 1995, p. 184)

As described above normalisation is not just a simple process. It is a process working with different mechanisms in different ways. In discussing its working mechanism Stenord gives us some further idea, “One key technology of power Foucault describes is ‘normalizing judgment.’ Objects of knowledge such as masculinity and femininity define for us what is normal and what is not” (Stenord, 2011, p. 273).

If we continue on the last point, masculinity and femininity, we can see that it comes up repeatedly in the empirical study. R.W. Connell’s statements might help for further understanding of the theme that, “Masculinities are defined collectively in culture, and are sustained in institutions” (Connell, 2000, p. 11) and “They are actively produced, using the resources and strategies available in a given social setting” (Connell, 2000, p. 12). In the empirical material it is also not difficult to see the focus on “sex role” and “biological dichotomy” (Connell, 1987).

## **Methodology**

The four schools visited are given an alphabetic name, as schools A, B, C and D. Pupils from white middle class families dominated school A. It charged higher school fees compared to the others. School B was located in a coloured community and most pupils came from this community. School C was, during apartheid, for white pupils from the vicinity, but at the time of the study it was a school for children from different groups including a large number of pupils bussed in from the townships. The last school, school D was located in a township and all the pupils were black, and they all came from the township.

In the four classes, lessons on role models were observed and recoded by digital voice recorder. As a supplement to observation, field notes were also taken. The recorded data was transcribed, summarised and analysed.

To be able to grasp the concept, the curriculum and textbooks were reviewed. To familiarise me with the field and to benefit this article, previous works in the field were scrutinised. Articles dealing with role models were reviewed.

## **Findings**

### **Texts on role models**

The Revised National Curriculum Statement (Department of Education, 2002) as indicated earlier gives as a standard assessment that a pupil in the third grade should tell “stories about female and male role models from a variety of local cultures” (Department of Education, 2002). In the teachers’ guide textbooks series (Best Books, 2003), stories of two heroes who

helped other people were given. The first one was Wolraad Woltemade, who saved some people from drowning and finally lost his own life (Best Books, 2003, p. 148). The second one was Cashes Kamver, a boy who helped his cousin Carol who fell down into a big quarry (they are both school children but their age is not given). He risked his own life jumping into a quarry, even though he broke his leg while jumping; he trusted his cousin to hold on and got out of the quarry and brought help to take her to a hospital (p. 151). The book also presented a story of Mandela as a child (p. 150).

Another book for third grade learners known as *My Clever Life Skills through Issues* (Struwig, 2003) provides information on role models. South Africans well known worldwide such as Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu were presented very briefly. Singers Lucky Dube and Mduzuzi Tshabalala (Mandoza) and a world-class swimmer, Natalie du Toit, were presented as role models. There are also questions asked for the learners to answer in relation to these people: why are they considered by many people to be role models and to which cultural group do they belong?

### **From the lessons**

**School A.** The teacher started by using the term *hero* and later shifted to using *role models*. On different occasions during the lesson she defined role models. Her definitions included: “Role models are people who make difference,” “A role model is a person we look up to as a good example,” “A role model is somebody you look up to and sets example.”

Among her examples of role models, Nelson Mandela was given the first place. She read his life history from his childhood to the time he became a president of South Africa. She also mentioned that he wrote a book called *Long Walk to Freedom*, where he tells his life story and his anti-apartheid struggle. She asked if any of the pupils read the children’s version of Mandela’s book *Long Walk to Freedom* and only one pupil raised his hand. She read to the children from a book about his life, his struggle against apartheid, his 27 years of imprisonment, his release, his struggle to set up a new South African constitution to bring South Africans together and his being the first black president of South Africa.

In short stories from a third grade life skills book (Clever Books, 2003), she read about Desmond Tutu who was a teacher and later became a priest. He was involved in an anti-apartheid struggle and after the end of apartheid he preached for freedom and equality of people all over the world; he talked about injustice and tried to give voice to those “who cannot fight for themselves”. She also read to the pupils about: the singer Lucky Dube, who came from a poor family and later on became known as an anti-apartheid singer; another singer known by his artist name Mandoza (Mduzuzi Tshabalala), who was born in Soweto, imprisoned as young boy for stealing a car and later on left the criminal world and became a famous singer; Natalie du Toit who started swimming for the South African team when she was 14 and later on lost her left leg in a motor accident but persisted in swimming and broke two world records in the Paralympics. In her case the book poses questions as to whether she is a worthy role model and why. After being asked about her cultural group at the end of the book, pupils are asked what they want to tell her and, if they want to say something, they are asked to write it in the speech bubble given in the workbook.

In addition to what she read from the book, the teacher mentioned Helen Suzman for speaking against injustice.<sup>2</sup> Mark Shuttleworth (the first South African space traveller) was considered for his support of mathematics and science education in South African schools, and Lucas Radebe, for being a good captain for South African football team Bafana.

After presenting the different role models, the teacher asked the pupils to write five sentences in ten minutes on what they thought of a good role model. Then they were asked to read one by one what they had written in their exercise books. Most of the answers were repetitive, and some pupils were irritated by those who replied before them for giving the answers they planned to give when it was their turn. Some of the answers given by the pupils on being a good role model are: taking care of people, having respect for people, giving others opportunities and setting a good example. They also gave living a healthy life and environmental awareness as good role model qualities. Listening, believing in his/her religion and helping charity were other qualities pupils considered as important.

At the end of the class they were given pieces of paper showing events in Nelson Mandela's life, which they were asked to put in the right chronological order to make a paragraph. The text about one of the role models, Mandoza, maybe gives a warning. He was imprisoned for stealing a car, but when he left the criminal path and joined the music world he started to be considered as a role model.

In this class the teacher emphasised the role models the pupils should "look up to". She also read from a text and orally explained what these people had accomplished to be considered as role models. But that did not impress the pupils in the class. Instead of these people known for various reasons, in the pupils' choice of role models, they preferred qualities which had not been given for these people; they emphasised qualities such as taking care of people, respect for people, giving opportunities to others, living a healthy life, environmental awareness, etc.

**School B.** At the beginning of the class the teacher asked what a role model was and got replies from different pupils. One pupil replied that a role model was a star; another one said an actor, and a third one, a designer. Some others mentioned their favourite football or rugby players as role models.

The teacher, at the beginning of the class and on occasions during the lesson, returned back to giving her definition of role models. She said, "A role model is somebody you are looking up to. Somebody we want to be like, you learn from, truthful and fair." Later she gave another similar definition, "A role model is someone you should look up to, somebody who sets an example for you. Somebody you want to look like and somebody who has a good quality." Again a while later she said, "These are people who set an example for you to follow."

Once in a while she used the word leader instead of role model and explained the qualities of a good leader as "He must be responsible; he must be nice to people; he must be kind, respectful, caring and faithful." She concluded by saying "a role model should also have such qualities.

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<sup>2</sup> Helen Suzman was a South African politician, who at one time during apartheid was the only member of parliament from the progressive party. She was a known anti-apartheid politician who was a member of South African parliament for 36 years.

<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/575892/Helen-Suzman>

She said, “Your role model could be people within sports activity, from TV programmes or family members.” She then continued, “We all need role models in our life” and asked the pupils to repeat with her the following statements: “A role model is somebody you look up to”, “I have a role model. My role model is...” After repeating these statements three times, she asked them to write the statements in their exercise books and then write their role model in the blank space given. She instructed them to draw their role model and write why they considered the person as their role model.

As we read it above the teacher defined role models as “somebody you are looking up to, somebody we want to be like, you learn from, truthful and fair ... somebody who sets an example for you, somebody who has good qualities. She further explained which types of people could be role models, “your role model could be people within sports activity, from TV programmes or family members.”

The pupils’ reply to their teacher’s question as to who their role models are and why they considered them as their role models gives a different picture. Their choices do not match the ones given by the different texts and presented to them by their teacher.

They considered their mother, brother, father and sister instead of the well-known personalities from TV programmes or people involved in sports activities that the teacher mentioned. Some of the reasons they gave for their choices were “your father shares your life”, “your mother tells you what you should do”, “your mother cares for you, guides you and she sets a good example for you.”

**School C.** The teacher informed the class that they are going to talk about heroes. She asked the class “Who is Mandela?” One pupil replied, “He is a hero”, and another pupil said, “He is the president.” She explained to the class that he was a former president; she asked about the current interim president of South Africa, and a pupil gave the right answer, that it was Mr. Kgalema Motlante, who was the interim president of the country in 2009, in the transition from Tabo Mbeki to Jacob Zuma.

She then posed the question of what a hero is and replied to it herself. Her reply was “A hero is a person who puts his own life in danger for helping others.” She illustrated the situation by saying that, if a person jumps into a swimming pool to help a drowning person without considering the danger to his own life, he is a hero.

She told the story of Rachel de Beer, who lived in the Drakensberg area of South Africa with her farming family. She was 12 years old, and one day there was a snowstorm, and all cattle were brought in except for a lamb (the book says *calf* but the teacher used *lamb*) that was left out there. The girl begged her father to let her go out and look for it, and she got permission from her father, and later on her younger brother was allowed to follow her. While they were out, they were surprised by a heavy storm. They found an old ant-hill which she cleaned out and wrapped her brother in all her clothes except her underwear and she closed the opening of the ant-hill with her body. The next day she was found dead but her brother survived. The teacher said, “She is one of South Africa’s heroines.”

When Mandela was 9 his father died and his relatives took him to the king of the Thimbu people. He wrote in his book that, once, he and some other boys were taking turns to ride a donkey, and, when it was his turn, someone hit the donkey from behind and the donkey threw him into a thorny bush, and he bled a lot, and his friends teased him. He says the teasing felt

painful on his heart; it pained him more than the thorns. So then he decided not to do what hurts others. Even if sometimes he was forced to use a weapon, he always wanted to be fair and not to hurt others. The king wanted him to marry and live in the area, but he wanted education, went to Johannesburg and started working in the mines and then attended school at evening classes. Later on he completed his studies to become a lawyer. He got involved in the struggle, so that now in this country we do not talk very much about what colour we are: we all are equal.

The teacher asked, “Why do they say Mandela is a hero? And Rachel de Beer is a heroine?” And her reply was that they saved the lives of other people. Rachel was concerned about the lamb, and she loved her brother and protected him and saved his life, and Mandela loved his people. The pupils were divided into five groups, and each group member got some pieces of paper with the story of Rachel de Beer in a mixed-up order and was asked to attach it to an A4 sheet of paper in the right chronological order.

At the end of the lesson the teacher explained to me that she started with Rachel de Beer with an aim. Rachel is a 12-year-old girl: she is about their age (they are between 8 and 10) and they can easily identify with her. Then you can move to the adults such as Emily Hobhouse<sup>3</sup> and Nelson Mandela.

Here the teacher explained, asked questions and answered the questions herself. Instead of role models she talked about heroes. According to the teacher Rachel de Beer is a heroine on account of her concern for the lamb and her love for her brother, while Mandela was given hero status for loving his people. In this class the voices of the pupils were not heard and their thinking about role models/heroes remained unsaid.

**School D.** The teacher, instead of giving a detailed explanation of role models, first divided the class into seven groups. Then she told them to propose a person whom they considered as a role model and show what motivated their choice. She then told them qualities of a good role model and where they can look for one. The qualities she mentioned were a respected, well educated, peacemaker, taking good care of himself/herself and a person who helps us and takes care of our community. She also told them a person with a high profile could be from their family, their community or a politician.

The seven groups came up with politicians, singers and football players as their role models. They chose a person and gave their motivations in brief and presented them to the class through one representative. The seven groups provided their role models and their motivations for doing so (In the presentation below G stands for Group).

G1 chose Jacob Zuma, because he is helpful, respectful, gives food to the community (this refers to government social support) and is well groomed.

G2, G3 and G7 gave Nelson Mandela as their preference. G2 said they considered him because he loved people, got a peace prize, was respectful, was educated, spent a large part of his life in prison, fought for the ANC and when he was released the first thing he did was come to the people and address them. G3's reply was given because he struggled against

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<sup>3</sup> Emily Hobhouse is a British woman who exposed, how the British kept the Afrikaans in concentration camps and treated them badly during the Anglo-Boer war of 1899 to 1902.  
<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/268503/Emily-Hobhouse>

apartheid through the ANC. G7 said he was well educated, he liked children, he was a freedom fighter, and he spent years in prison and fought for others.

G4 considered Mrs. Cobisa (a councillor in a township, employed by the city council), because she provides food (a parcel by government to needy areas) and oversees and identifies the needs of families. G5 gave four role models: Nelson Mandela because he saved them; Beyoncé, she sings very well; Tekomodise, he plays football well; and Mavelasi, he sings well, and he can dance. G6 considered one of the four mentioned in the previous group, Tekomodise, because they thought he played football well.

In this class the teacher first divided the pupils into groups and defined what she considered the good qualities of role models, “a respected, well educated, peace maker, taking good care of himself/herself and a person who helps us and takes care of our community”. Most of the groups considered Nelson Mandela as their role model but not only on the basis of criteria about role models that were given by their teacher. One group mentioned as one of their reasons that “when he was released the first thing he did was to come to the people and address them”; another group mentioned that “he liked children”, and the third group without explanation says, “because he saved us”. Even if it is not easy to decode fully what they meant by “because he saved us”, there are thoughts behind the statement that might indicate the peaceful transition from apartheid to a democratic system.

### **Discussion**

Teachers gave definitions of role models with some slight variations. Some tried to define their qualities, others emphasised their personality and others what they did. The common understanding is that role models are people who have encountered hardship in their lives and had the strength to get out of it. In some cases there is an emphasis on their willingness to offer themselves for the sake of those who need their help. The people given as examples suffered in prison, physically and in some cases lost their life.

In the classes studied a focus on the gender and racial grouping one belonged to could be seen in the case of preferred role models. In school A, mentioning Helen Suzman and Mark Shuttleworth could be related to the teachers’ and the schools’ focus on promoting an English background. School C, where the teacher emphasised the story of the 12-year-old Afrikaans girl, Rachel de Beer, was originally a school for children of Afrikaans background. Here the teacher also mentioned Emily Hobhouse, a British woman who fought against the British treatment of the Afrikaans during the Anglo-Boer war of 1899 to 1902.

Mandela was a popular role model in most of the classes. He was extra popular in school D, where all the pupils in the class come from a black township. Out of seven groups in the class choosing their role models, four of them considered Mandela as their role model. It is surprising he was not mentioned by pupils in school B. For reasons difficult to explain, pupils in school B preferred role models only from their own families.

On the other hand it was difficult to explain why no parents or family members were considered as role models in school D. A possible explanation could be the unemployment, poverty, disease and crime rates that prevail in their families who live in townships. These could negatively affect the children’s picture of their parents and their family members.

In general most of the role models given are South Africans. Some are, as we saw, internationally known figures such as Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu, while others are nationally popular figures. One group in school D considered as a role model a local community worker in their township. For the teacher in school B, the role model is mainly a “he”. Most of the role models considered in a textbook used are also men or black South African men. They are mainly politicians, musicians and athletes.

As to the reply to the question of who they considered as their role models, pupils did not always followed the proposal of their teachers. Surprisingly, there are no film stars or TV personalities mentioned by pupils. This could have been because of the poverty of most pupils’ families; they did not have access to TV or could not afford to go to movies frequently. In one class they preferred their parents to those distant politicians or TV stars or known sports personalities emphasised by their teacher. In another class when they considered Mandela as their role model their reasons were more relational than the heroic deed expressed by their teacher. They expressed this by saying the reason was because he liked children and when he was released he directly came to the people and addressed them.

Mandela was a popular role model among the pupils and teachers. His sufferings under apartheid, his fighting against it until the system collapsed and his conciliatory views after apartheid were among the main reasons for his being a preference for many. In some schools it was mainly his conciliatory and loving character that were emphasised. On the other hand in School D, among the black pupils whose parents were victims of apartheid, Mandela was considered as a role model for other qualities. They gave among their reasons that he, “fought for ANC”, “struggled against apartheid through ANC” and “was a freedom fighter”. It is both surprising and interesting to witness that time transported Mandela from yesterday’s terrorist (under apartheid) to today’s role model: *Long Walk* from being a terrorist to being a role model.

In an extended speculation to why this theme was included in the Revised National Curriculum Statement (RNCS, 2002), the standard unreflected reply could be: for the people to have good role models to follow; for schools to have ideal pupils who focus on and follow up the teaching and learning process; and for society to have law abiding and productive citizens. But it is difficult to ignore the possibility of the presence of untold motives too.

As it was shown in the role model examples given men are considered the norm, the ones to be seen and to occupy the public space and the heroes. The hero Wolraad Woltemade, Cashes Kamver, Nelson Mandela, etc. played their role and helped others and sacrificed themselves for others. On the other hand, women are supposed to play a mainly caring role.

One of the examples given, a 12-year-old Afrikaans girl, Rachel de Beer, can say something about normalising and gender stereotyping. The women are expected to be caring and responsible in another way to men. Rachel was worried for the lamb. It is clearly indicated that the father, not the mother, was the one with the authority who gave her permission to go out to look for it. It is also clear, as an elder sister, she was expected to play a mother’s role for her younger brother. This responsibility and care went to the extreme that she offered her life to save her brother’s life. This is an example of a tale for normalising societal structure and gender stereotype.

To include my observations from other occasions in these four schools, the use of terms such as class captain,<sup>4</sup> head boy<sup>5</sup> and head girl<sup>6</sup> are common, as is similar in other South African schools. The class captain works closely with the teacher, while the other two cooperate with the school administration. They are supposed to be the role models and they are also used as controllers for other pupils.

In relation to the importance given to role models as well as pupils' leaders in the school, it is difficult to escape the thought that the introduction of the theme has to do with controlling, disciplining and normalising pupils. The theme could be understood as part of:

A constant supervision of individuals by some who exercised a power over them – school teacher, foreman, physician, psychiatrist, prison warden – and who, so long as he exercised power had the possibility of both supervising and constituting a knowledge concerning those he supervised. A knowledge that now was no longer about determining whether or not something had occurred; rather, it was about whether an individual was behaving as he should, in accordance with the rule or not, and whether he was progressing or not...it was organised around the norm, in terms of what was normal or not, correct or not, in terms of what one must do or not do. (Foucault, 1994, p. 59)

On one occasion during the study I encountered what is described above by Foucault. In school A, pupils have uniforms of a different colour and style to mark their differences from other schools. In addition to that, in this school, the pupils have a special tag hung around their neck when going out to visit a bathroom and another tag when they are sent by their teacher to deliver a message to the office. This procedure allows control of pupils by their own class teacher and other teachers who see them on the corridors. There were also point systems for good behaviour that through accumulation provide four different types of badges for merits that the pupils can pin on their clothes and show with pride (Abraham, 2010). In addition to those given in the different texts, these pupils are also considered as role models. This is among the procedure of controlling, disciplining and normalising.

Pupils are encouraged to imitate the given role models. In the process of their development, their teachers are expected to control or do a follow up on their progress. Those who are obedient are rewarded and those who are not obedient could be disciplined by different methods of punishment.

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<sup>4</sup> Class Captain/President: A commander or a leader. A term used in this study to refer to a class representative (My own definition).

<sup>5</sup> Head Boy: "the most important boy in a school, chosen to lead a team of older boys (prefects) in controlling the younger ones, and to represent the school on public occasions." (Longman, 1992, p. 607).

<sup>6</sup> Head Girl: "the most important girl in a British school, chosen to lead a team of older girls (prefects) in controlling the younger ones, and to represent the school on public occasions (ibid.)."

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