

Born a Crime by Trevor Noah

To review, South Africa was granted full autonomy from the United Kingdom in 1931 (while the British followed Dutch and Portuguese colonization). Apartheid refers to the period between 1948 and 1991 in which South African whites instituted a more formalized, rigid, and violent system of racial classification and segregation across the country (though there was less formalized segregation prior to that). Trevor Noah begins formal schooling as apartheid is ending.

Think about the question “Whose knowledge counts?” Write a response in which you discuss some of the ways you see “official” knowledge used as a tool for oppression in Noah’s personal story and/or the story of apartheid South Africa.

The government made sure that people were schooled in their home language, whether that was English, Xhosa, Zulu, Afrikaans, or Tswana. During apartheid, the whites were taught that African languages were inferior. Noah’s mom made sure that English was his first language because knowing English made you different, in a good way. English gave you advantages you wouldn’t have otherwise had. Noah’s mother learned various languages and according to him, “[s]he used language to cross boundaries, handle situations, [and] navigate the world” (p. 54). Noah grew up to learn various languages just like his mother. He described language as “a tool that served me my whole life” (p. 55). Language was used to change others’ perception of you, and knowing various languages helped you blend in with many different people.

Apartheid also utilized grouping systems to organize people by race. Depending on what race you were determined how you were treated. In a way, race also determined how knowledgeable you were. Proponents of apartheid would speak differently to people, depending on their race. This essentially gave the whites permission to speak down to blacks and colored people. Apartheid made this racism legitimate. The assumption back then was that blacks and coloreds didn’t know much anyway.

Throughout the book, we get glimpses of Noah’s school experiences. What stands out to you about how he negotiates schooling? In what ways is he helped and harmed by the institutions he encounters?

Maryvale College was a private Catholic school that Noah attended in his early years. This school sheltered him from the reality of racism. It really wasn’t an issue in this school, unlike in the real world. However, this Catholic school also had its own problems. According to Noah, “Catholic school is similar to apartheid in that it’s ruthlessly authoritarian, and its authority rests on a bunch of rules that don’t make any sense” (p. 87). To Noah, the laws governed by apartheid didn’t make much sense. Likewise, God’s rules and how the school functioned didn’t make much sense. Take, for example, the Eucharist. Noah wasn’t allowed to have Jesus’s body

and blood because he wasn't Catholic. This led him to find and consume the grape juice and crackers simply because he was hungry.

H.A. Jack Primary was a government school. Noah was put into the smart "A" classes with mostly white students. It wasn't until recess that Noah saw all of the black kids. This experience was difficult at first because Noah didn't really fit in with the white or the black students. As school continued, Noah insisted on being in the "B" classes with his black friends. He was warned by the counselor not to switch because "those kids are gonna hold you back" (p. 58). This didn't make sense to Noah because he simply thought that "English is English [and] [m]ath is math" (p. 58).

Bantu schools were another example of the oppression associated with apartheid. Taught in the students' home language, their purpose was to keep the blacks uneducated and under control. These schools simply "taught metrics and agriculture" (p. 61). These schools were run down, the classrooms were crowded, and the teachers were often illiterate themselves. Under apartheid, blacks didn't deserve better.

In what ways do you see this story connecting to schooling in the United States? And what do you think about that?

Unfortunately, I see several connections between South African schools and schools here in the United States. While discrimination based on race is technically illegal in the U.S., racism remains rampant and is often seen in communities and schools. What's more, I find it disturbing that whites are predominantly in higher-level and advanced classes while blacks are overwhelmingly placed into average or remedial classes. I am basing this information on what I've personally seen as a teacher and what I've read in education news. It makes me wonder if black students are set up for failure from the start because overall, "white" schools are better funded than "black" schools.

I used to work in an impoverished, mostly black school. When I collaborated with Spanish teachers at other "whiter" schools, I was amazed at how much more they had access to. I was envious because they had so many cool resources, both physical and digital. What bothered me the most was that they had funding for materials like textbooks and supplements, whereas I had to beg for a replacement classroom set of textbooks because the ones I had were rebound multiple times and had pages missing or falling out. As big and wealthy as Wake Co. is, the disparity can be significant and flat out discouraging.

References

Noah, T. (2016). *Born a crime: stories from a South African childhood*. New York: Spiegel & Grau.