

50 years on ... MEMORIES DRAWN from 1976

3 South Africans remember schooling as
“Education being the GATE to success”



What nobody said
was that the gate
looked different
depending on
where you stood ...

... a reality only
fully voiced in
narrative
interviews years
later, in 2026.

“If I do well,
I will be okay.”

Katryn - White woman,
age 8 in 1976

“Amandla. Awethu.
Let's go gents.”

Shabs - Indian Muslim
male, age 9 in 1976

“I didn't quite
cope.”

Emily - White woman,
age 7 in 1976

One Promise, Unequal Realities

All three participants grew up inside a powerful story: that doing well at school would secure a good life. As adults, each one holds that promise up to the light and finds it wanting. Katryn believed it, succeeded at school, and still reached a point in adult life where the promise simply failed her. Emily believed the same story but struggled at school, and so carried the belief that she would not do well in life either. Shabs believed it too, and to a degree still does, but he names the condition the others never had to see: the gate only opened for families who could afford to keep a child in school. The same childhood promise produced three different adult reckonings.

“Because I did well I was like, oh okay, I do well so I will be okay. And then it was a big shock for me in my life later when ... I realised, but I am not okay.”

“If you could have afforded to be sent to varsity by your parents, then you were one of the lucky ones.”

“If you weren't clever, you would just scrape through and that's how you would determine the rest of your life. And I can see how that's played out through my life.”

Inside the gate and outside it

Division by Race and Academic Merit

The interviews are full of boundaries between those who belonged and those who did not, and two such boundaries run side by side. Apartheid drew the first, deciding which children were inside white schooling and which were shut out of it. The school itself drew the second, sorting children into the 'clever' and the 'not clever', sometimes seating them in the room by rank. A child could sit comfortably inside one boundary and painfully outside the other. The two lines are different, but they share a logic: an inside that is affirmed and protected, and an outside that is left to cope alone. Naming both shows that exclusion at school was not only about race; it was also about how the school decided a child's worth.

“It's actually terrible to think that you can put children in boxes like that, but you sat according to your marks.”

“We were taken from our houses and put in a different area, because we could not stay there anymore.”

“You either had clever people or not so clever people. There wasn't a thing that you could improve yourself.”

Race decided what a child could even see

Privilege Determined What Children Could Ignore

The starkest contrast in the data is not what the children felt, but what they were able to know. The two white participants, shielded by their race, recall almost no awareness of Apartheid or of the 1976 uprising during their school years; politics was, in their own words, far removed. Shabs could not look away, because his race placed him inside those events from birth. This is the reality the study does not soften: not knowing was not a personal choice or a lack of curiosity. It was a privilege that whiteness granted and that the structures of Apartheid denied to everyone else. We do not choose our race, but in 1976 South Africa, race decided whether a child had the option to ignore politics at all.

“We played with the black children, and we had no idea at first that they go to another school and we go to this school.”

“We needed somebody to spark this for us to follow ... we're not taking this anymore.”

“They had to have a pass ... if you didn't have your pass, people would get arrested. And I just remember my mom being so angry at that system.”

Schooling the Mind, neglecting the Child as a whole

Measured by Marks, Not by Humanity

Across all three accounts, school is remembered as attending narrowly to academic performance while leaving the emotional and relational life of a child untouched. Katryn and Emily describe a system that never asked how a child was actually coping, and that treated creativity itself as something with only one correct answer. Shabs remembers teachers who genuinely cared and disciplined, yet he mourns what schooling has lost since: the time and the attention that once made a child feel guided. From different directions, all three arrive at the same place. School treated children as learners to be ranked, when what they also needed was to be supported as whole people.

“School doesn't make space for children with problems. It doesn't accommodate children with emotional issues.”

“Our teachers and our tutors, they took the effort and initiative to make us successful because of the conditions we lived in. They encouraged us.”

School shouldn't just be about learning ... obviously [it's] important but I think there's so many other skills that are just as important that your school curriculum just misses out completely -

Looking back with warmth; looking around with disappointment

Remembering the Past Through Present Disillusionment

All three participants narrate childhood with real fondness: the freedom to roam, simpler social worlds, a slower pace of life. Yet that warmth is bound up with unease about the present. Shabs is the most direct, describing a country he feels has been failed by corruption and a government that let its own people down. From a different vantage point, Katryn reaches a similar emotional place, sensing that everyone now seems angry. The nostalgia and the disappointment are not two separate feelings. They are one movement: the past is held tenderly precisely because the present has not become what that generation, in 1976, hoped it might.

“It feels to me everyone is angry. Everyone is angry. And take it out on each other.”

“Coming from that era and to come into this present moment ... the government has let its own people down.”

“There was amazing freedom of just being able to meet up with friends ... you could just walk the roads with no worry.”

*Fifty years on, three South Africans look back at the same gate.
What each one saw through it was decided long before they could choose, by the colour of their skin.*