
Bishops Prep PA



BISHOPS
DIOCESAN COLLEGE

Term 2 - 2021

PA Transformation Conversation

Preamble

The Prep and Pre-Prep Parents' Association hosted two parents' workshops (one in-person, one online) on the subject of Transformation, Diversity and Inclusion. The purpose was not to have an expert deliver generic content and advice on the topic but, rather, to hear from school stakeholders what the experience has been at Bishops to date. These took the format of Q&A sessions with Principal Tony Reeler and Headmaster Greg Brown, followed by parents reflecting on these discussions.

The Q&A topics covered:

- Thoughts on the biggest challenges Bishops faces in trying to achieve transformation, diversity and inclusion
- What changes have been achieved to date
- The particular challenges we have in dealing with Transformation issues in young boys, as those at the Prep and Pre-Prep are
- Dealing with transformation and diversity in a Covid world
- The pace of change
- The list of demands from the Matrics last year
- Measures of "success" with regard to achievement of transformation goals

The online has been edited for length and can be viewed [here](#).

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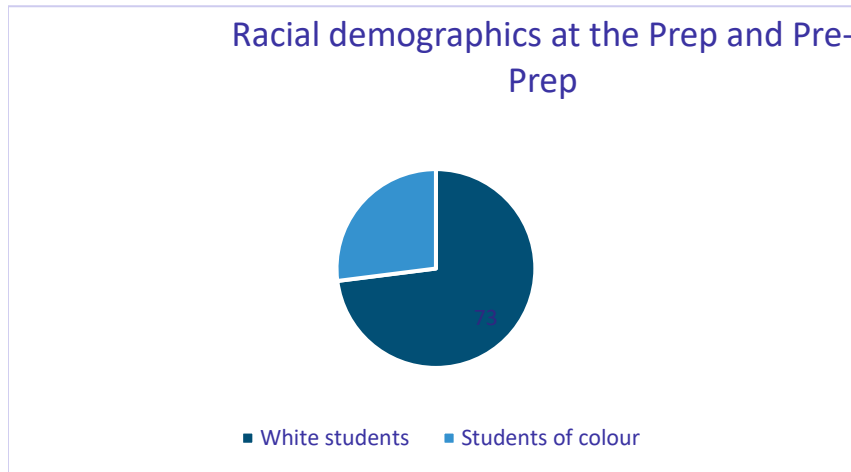
Headmaster Greg Brown

“My best moments have been seeing the ways in which (the boys) engage with each other authentically and, naturally, across all lines of difference”.

Principal Tony Reeler

Through these sessions, close to 100 parents were able to meet Principal Reeler (many for the first time) and listen to his and Headmaster Brown's personal experiences with regard to transformation prior to joining Bishops and also at Bishops. This was also Principal Reeler's first opportunity to meet with so many parents from the Prep and Pre-Prep given the Covid-related restrictions.





Headmaster Greg Brown



He has been at the school for over a decade and was previously at a State / Model C school, which was quite diverse in terms of race and class, being attended by children of blue collar and professional workers. Many of the parents had political bents, having been activists in their youths, attending schools such as Livingstone, Harold Cressy and Trafalgar. The PoC / White ratio at this "woke" school was 45:55. When he joined Bishops, only 20% of

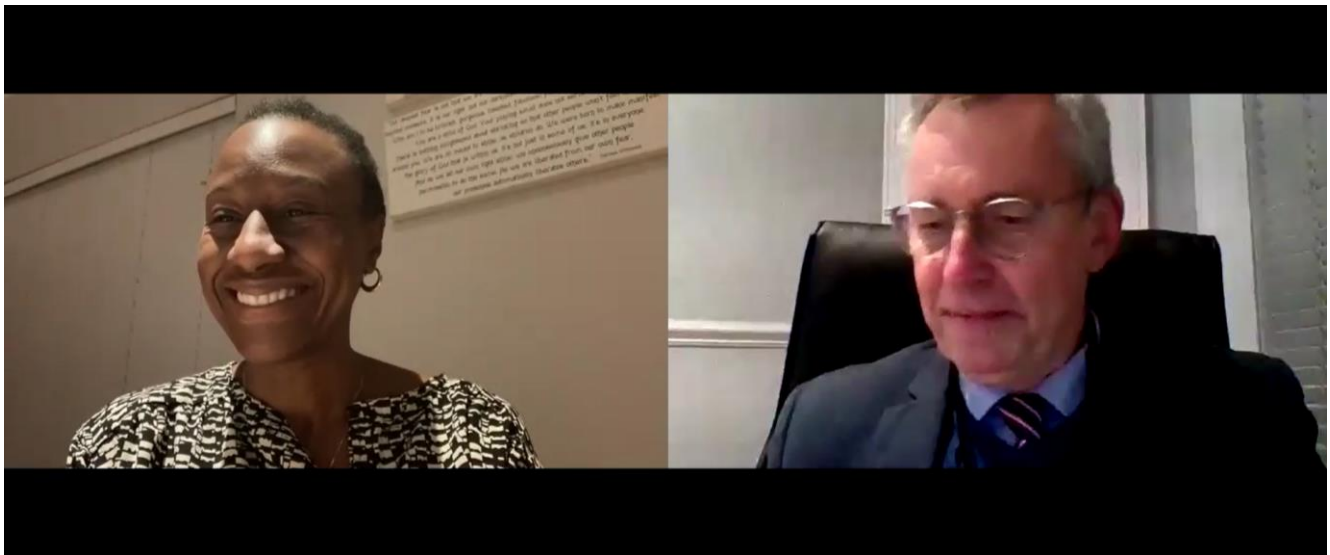
students were of colour and he had naively assumed that it would be easy to achieve transformation (in the statistical sense). Right now, the Prep comprises 26/27% boys of colour, with the lower grades reaching as high as 30%. (He acknowledges that there is a move away from talking about transformation in terms of numbers, in favour of proper inclusion).

The overarching challenges to achieving numeric transformation have been:

-  Finance / access to wealth sufficient to sustain Bishops fees.
-  The religious foundation automatically precludes families who would prefer that their boys attend secular institutions.
-  The existing low numbers set up a vicious cycle whereby families of colour may prefer schools that are already more diverse.
-  The traditional boys' school ethos does not suit all families.

Some forward momentum has been achieved by increasing the numbers of boys on legacy bursary programs (made available to boys from disadvantaged communities and awarded on merit), the establishment of [future-fit sustainability policies](#) and the creation of focus groups at College level where, for the first time, boys of colour have reported microaggressions and implied racism. Previously (in the wake of Hair Must Fall and Rhodes Must Fall), Bishops boys seemed unperturbed and behind the curve, in comparison to their female counterparts. In fact, the school proactively removed a bust of Rhodes from the library, which went unnoticed by the boys. However, in the context of BLM and the Matric protest last year, it's clear that the boys are now taking more of a stand. The school has been criticised for "admiring" the Matrics and their protest last year, but they were actually appealing to the institution to look anew at what was being done and their specific requests were commendable; boys are not always that forthcoming and can be glib about these issues, but they have opened the door now.

Importantly, we're now looking at our community and thinking about how we can accept each, not just live next to each other (or expect someone who is not in the majority to behave like the majority).



A challenge at Prep level is that the boys don't talk about this issue or notice difference very much yet and we want to find the balance of raising awareness while not oversensitising them to it. but there have been additional efforts placed on diversifying the curriculum and staff make-up, along with other structural changes. Gr7 boys are far more literate around the issues and can identify and call out overt racism and homophobia, but they are not quite as conscious of the "implied stuff" at this point.

A big positive shift is that teachers no longer talk about being colour-blind and can celebrate difference while embracing commonality e.g. boys should be interested in what their Muslim and Jewish peers are doing on Fridays. The workshops held with Lele Mehlomakulu for all staff, from the academic to the maintenance staff, have been eye-opening and stimulated conversation on uncomfortable topics. For the boys, we don't talk about *racism*, we talk about understanding, respect and diversity, which is what parents should do, too.

Principal Tony Reeler

Tony arrived in the middle of a pandemic, right after the Matric protest. Given that schools are relational places, the biggest challenge was (is) not being able to connect with the boys, staff and parents. His modus operandi has always been to get to know a place and its culture before changing anything, which is why he hasn't set out a "Vision" for Bishops, insofar as transformation is concerned. He has only been here ten months and he had committed to giving everyone a year of breathing space. All the while, he acknowledges that he is a heterosexual White male, so he has privilege and, while he has not experienced suffering, he still has a role to play in influencing others to think and act differently.

He wasn't surprised at the Matric protest, given the heightened consciousness around the issue, even though White schools are in a position of privilege and could stay silent on so many issues like this. But other schools in SA have been places where young, developing minds can engage on these topics (especially in the 70s and 80s), so it stands to reason that boys of parents who attended those sorts of schools would now take up the mantle of activism now. But the narratives that came out were heartbreaking and he has spent a lot of time talking to last year's Matrics, ODs who posted their stories on social media and parents, delving into the issues.



He still refers to the [list of demands](#) from the Matrics, which was a catalyst for a wake-up, but cautions that, just because most of these have been addressed, he does not believe that this work is done. It is an ongoing journey and will remain so forever as incoming generations of Bishops boys need to understand what inclusion is. He cautions the boys now left at the school not to be beholden to the activism of yesteryear, either; if there are new things that the school isn't getting right, he wants to hear about them, given that this is a long-term process. He had been impressed by all the policies, future-fitting sustainability goals and targets Bishops had relating to diversity and inclusion, but the lived experiences were obviously different.

Another frustration (stemming from the lack of ability to engage) is that he has had to manage expectations in terms of pace and timing of change. He has been told that, if we move too fast, he will "lose" a whole lot of people, while others are frustrated that the journey is too long and slow. He wants us all to acknowledge that we're moving in the same direction and we must move together. The school has initially focussed on the staff, the people who will

be here the longest and he understands that parents feel left out. But he, too, is not happy with the pace of change (not helped by Covid) and he won't be apologetic and make excuses for it and wants us all to keep connecting.

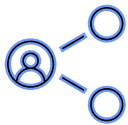
A unique perspective that he has gained over the years, has come from his seven-year stint at Pinelands High School, where he was in the minority, both as a White person and a male. Apart from great learning opportunities such as the [Rainbow Camps](#), he was also given the opportunity to be in the (numerical) minority and he encourages anyone who wants to engage on this topic to be in the minority in a space to see what it feels like, to understand the challenges. Additionally, moving to Gauteng, he was also exposed to the different dynamic of a much larger Black middle class; Cape Town has such a different feel so, returning here was eye-opening.

In watching the boys, his best moments have been in seeing the ways in which they engage with each other authentically and, naturally, across all lines of difference. As a White male who attended school in a different era, he feels he has missed out on something. The creation of Bishops Pride was particularly fantastic. His worst moments have come when boys do stupid and insensitive things. But this comes with the territory of raising and educating children; will all the best-laid principles, they still make mistakes.

"What does success look like?" doesn't have an answer – it's personal for everyone. Our core ethos needs to be one of belonging; though it sounds soft and measurable, but respect and understanding are so important. Hard targets need to be in relation to demographics of the school catching up with the country etc., but this can't be the only thing.

We also can't rely on Lele to change everything at Bishops, she is just the spark that ignites conversations like these and keeps the boys talking to each other. We don't tick boxes and say "transformation is done". But a number of hard targets *have* been met (workshops for teachers, more inclusive spaces for all staff, entrance of the Mitre and the admin block changed to reflect more diversity and maintenance staff have a greater educational stipend for their children). Further, the "plan" has existed (on the school website) since 2017 and part of his job is to assess whether it is still relevant.

Parent breakaways



Parents joined smaller "breakaway" groups and were invited to:

- Reflect on what they had heard from Tony and Greg
- Share their own experiences of the transformation journey at Bishops
- Identify a concern they would like to table with the school and
- Identify a message of hope
- Share these back in the plenary session

The overarching themes that emerged are highlighted below.

Fears / concerns / questions



Process

- There is insufficient feedback on the external process being facilitated by Lele Mehlomakulu
- What *is* the actual plan for Bishops, what are the next steps in the process?
- The process is not happening fast enough
- We have not seen enough transformation in leadership yet, and we know that positive role modelling is important
- Will policies be created from scratch?
- How will their impact be measured?

Comparison to other schools

- There is the perception that other schools (some in CT, some in Jhb) are doing so much more or, if they're not actually doing more, they certainly communicate more
- Transformation Committees at other schools include teachers, students, heads of school and past pupils
- We see other schools celebrating difference with purpose and determination; the small things could make a big difference.

(Tony acknowledges that we are doing things differently, focussing on hearts and minds and long-term sustainability).

Stakeholder involvement

- Parents are key stakeholders and it does not feel as though they are involved enough yet
- The parents who would benefit most from these engagements do not attend these events; how do we address this?
- When instances of racism or microaggressions occur, the school shouldn't just address the affected parties, but the message needs to be shared broader, to all boys and parents.

Philosophy / underlying principles

- We have spent too long entrusting this process to White men and making irrelevant and imagined stakeholders feel comfortable
- Bishops does everything else with excellence, drive and determination, so it is in a position to be more radical in forcing change, rather than being reactive. It does not have to be hamstrung by legacy. There is a difference between tradition and traditional values; you can do away with the former and not lose the latter.
- The soft targets like workshops are all well and good; why aren't we moving forward with the hard targets?
- In the midst of all the soft targets, how do we keep the momentum going and not allow ourselves to believe the soft targets are the endgame?
- What is the school's imperative for making a change? Societal pressure or the belief that this is the right thing to do?
- We don't want children who have privilege to feel guilty for being White
- There is anxiety stemming from the fact that the children could end up as collateral damage in this process.

Hope / positive takeaways



- The mere fact that so many people sat in the room and engaged was a consistent source of hope and positivity
- There are parents of colour who, while they do acknowledge there is work to be done, have not felt *unwelcome* at the school, so the assumption is that we're going in the right direction
- Boys have shown a natural curiosity about each other; this is something we can harness. We can have these conversations in the home and not just expect the institution to drive change
- The "soft" stuff is still crucial to the process – hearts and minds change as a result.

There was a call for conversation, in addition to requests for and suggestions of shared resource libraries and questioning how we can get further involvement from the parents and boys who do not currently participate, but who would stand to benefit.

It is clear that parents want more of this kind of engagement and the sessions, though short, were received well.