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Comparative and International Education Society (CIES) 'Illuminating the Power of Idealism' conference in Minnesota, US.

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I am deeply grateful to Changing the Story for sponsoring my trip to the CIES 2022 education conference in Minneapolis, Minnesota. While I had the opportunity to present a co-written paper with a colleague Dr Sara Black, on some of the challenges in organising and resistance among teachers in contemporary South Africa and certainly benefited much from the scholarly engagements as a PhD student, this was also my first time traveling outside the continent of Africa and the experience was incredibly eye-opening and educational on many levels.

I am deeply conscious of inequalities within South Africa but also not always acutely aware about what is 'absent'. For example, it is taken for granted here to exercise extra caution when using any kind of public transport service as there are real risks, which are amplified when carrying items like a mobile phone or a laptop. While these risks were also present in Minnesota, the CBD area offered multiple ways to move around including a bus service, a light rail, a large skyway network, bicycles, and scooters for hire on the sidewalks and all of these were readily available. This made me somewhat conscious of what challenges we take for granted in South Africa, and especially so for local commuters who need to use public transport on a daily basis to get to work because of the underdevelopment and poor spatial planning of apartheid.

One fairly shocking experience of the city was moving between the various parts of the 'twin cities' Minneapolis and St Paul and seeing how the entire cultural expression, for instance restaurants, graffiti and the kind of housing differs. This felt quite jarring in the sense that the spaces were also racialised. It was like Cape Town, only on a much larger scale and with much more stark separation. In a way it felt as if driving into a new neighbourhood was like entering another country.

Two highlights about the CIES conference were connecting and networking with some critical scholars who have a strong orientation to social justice and work in the field of education policy from places like South America, US, UK and the continent of Africa, but also having the opportunity to join a group of scholars on a visit to meet with some organisers of the George Floyd protests at 'George Floyd Memorial Square' which was a story I had only followed on media outlets. Being there and meeting people from the neighborhood gave me a sense of the scale of the movement and also allowed me to see what a huge part arts and cultural resistance played within their protest actions (which included stories about making an ice-rink for children in the road, the installation of a community 'library', the slogan of 'no justice no streets!', the making of 'Say their names' graveyard/art-installation and so much more).

To speak more about the paper I presented, it was a co-written piece with a friend who has recently moved to King's College London, Dr Sara Black. Our paper was an auto-reflection on our experiences within two organisations that emerged during the 2020 Covid-19 lockdown in South Africa (The C-19 People's Coalition Education Workgroup and the Progressive Organisations Formation). Looking back, we reflect on why these organisations emerged under pandemic conditions and why they were unable to organise young teachers around a binding narrative that is oriented towards social justice and dignity in schools. We drew on the work of Antonio Gramsci, in particular the notion of political hegemony and the 'interregnum', as well as the work of Stuart Hall and Dario Gentile to consider crises as an instrument of government and how the dominant order in moments of acute crisis attempts to construct false binary options that are unable to resolve the underlying structural crisis. At a very local level we explore how debates about 'opening' or 'closing' schools often missed the underlying reality that whether schools were open or closed, students would suffer (because of the gross inequalities that existed even before the pandemic) and how debates about whether to write or not to write the 'matric' (final) exam also failed to account for the ways in which the aspirations of the majority of students are not realised even in an ordinary school year. The urgency

around 'loss of learning' and 'future prospects' forces people into 'choosing' from binary options, neither of which are desirable nor attend to the underlying crisis.

I have come back with a new consciousness both about the place I have visited but also about our own challenges in South Africa, and I am enriched with new ideas about the potential of new modes of political expression as well as global collaboration of people who suffer in different ways and places but from the effects of the same global issues.