

Edcent Williams – Education, Psychology and Liberation Theology

(Ismail Vadi)

Edcent Williams was a rare and complex educator. In his career he was able to fuse progressive educational principles, psychology and liberation theology. He was a seasoned teacher, senior education manager, specialist in special education and a Catholic activist espousing the values of liberation theology. At a time when it was not fashionable for members of the education inspectorate to identify with progressive, anti-apartheid education organisations and the broader liberation struggle, Edcent was not afraid to stick out his neck and take a stand. He openly associated with the Progressive Teachers' League when it was established in 1986, and later with SADTU-Lenasia, much to the chagrin of the educational bureaucracy linked to the House of Delegates based in Durban.



Edcent Williams was born on 8 October 1946. He was the son of a school principal, Major Williams, who for many years was based in Standerton. Edcent matriculated at Lenasia High School. He graduated from the TCE as a teacher and later completed his post-graduate studies in educational psychology at the University of Durban-Westville and Wits University.

Edcent taught at Trinity High School in the 1970s, where I was a pupil. His presentations in the school assembly were accompanied by a guitar and the favourite song that he always had sung for us was Bob Dylan's "Blowin' in the Wind". In that alone he was subtly giving us a powerful socio-political message of what was happening in the world. The emotive words of that protest song still linger in minds of that generation:

How many roads must a man walk down
Before you call him a man?
How many seas must a white dove sail
Before she sleeps in the sand?
Yes, and how many times must the cannonballs fly
Before they're forever banned?
The answer, my friend, is blowin' in the wind
The answer is blowin' in the wind.
Yes, and how many years must a mountain exist
Before it is washed to the sea?
And how many years can some people exist
Before they're allowed to be free?
Yes, and how many times can a man turn his head
And pretend that he just doesn't see?
The answer, my friend, is blowin' in the wind
The answer is blowin' in the wind.
Yes, and how many times must a man look up
Before he can see the sky?
And how many ears must one man have
Before he can hear people cry?
Yes, and how many deaths will it take 'til he knows
That too many people have died?
The answer, my friend, is blowin' in the wind
The answer is blowin' in the wind.

Edcent was an enthusiastic and talented musician and organist. His musical creativity was best expressed through the band that he led, "The Echoes", that famously played at the Lenz Civic Centre when there was very little in the way of culture in a community that was ripped apart by the Group Areas Act. He was a keen soccer player having played for Socials Football Club and later Daffodils FC.

Edcent was a committed Catholic and was closely associated with Father Smith based at the church in Lenasia. For both Catholicism had to address the effects of racial oppression, poverty and inequality in the church, community and society at large. Edcent was inspired by the concept of liberation theology and its application in his work in education generally and special education more specifically. He will best be remembered as an education psychologist, who was instrumental in starting up Psychological Services within the Department in the 1980s.

Edcent Williams went on to head the 'Psych Services' in Transvaal under the House of Delegates. When the Gauteng Department of Education was established, he

was part of the Senior Management Team responsible for the restructuring of education services on a non-racial basis in the new provincial administration. Later, he was appointed to the national Department of Education and his last post was as the Head of Department: Education in the Northern Cape Provincial Administration. Edcent Williams passed away on 12 December 2018, aged 72.

(A Tribute to Edcent Williams - Jace Pillay)

It is not easy to pay tribute to an amazing colleague, mentor, friend and brother. As a colleague I first met Edcent thirty-one years ago when he came to critic me as a newly appointed guidance and counselling teacher at MH Joosub High School. He was so down to earth, approachable and developmental in his manner and interaction with me. This was unlike the other school inspectors I encountered over my lifetime as an educator, who were just out to crucify me for my courageous stand against all forms of injustice and oppression. Edcent encouraged me to keep faith and together we travelled many roads of fighting for social justice.

Most of his life he played an active role in the liberation struggle silently and in the background, doing what others did not do. I often think that his great achievements in the liberation movement was not sufficiently recognised or appreciated because he did not go into exile or spend time in jail. Edcent could easily have secured prominent posts in politics, but he deliberately chose to make a difference in education and psychology.

When I was transferred to a school in Durban in 1990, Edcent rocked up at MHJ, looked at my transfer letter and tore it in my presence. He said, "I got news for you. You are not going back. I will second you to Psychological Services." That is how my own career trajectory in the fields of education and psychology began.

We had a core team led by him that was instrumental in shaping many of the current policies we have in special and inclusive education. He is indeed a true icon in making this country a better place for marginalised, disabled and poverty-stricken children through the numerous policy and regulations that have been endorsed over the years. As a colleague he was selfless in sharing and imparting the abundance of knowledge he was blessed with. He always said the best way of keeping your knowledge is by giving it away. He walked this talk until the day he left this earth. He was a man of many words, knowledgeable about any subject, an academic and profound scholar but not once in all my years with him did I ever listen to him speak about himself. This is the kind of simplicity and humility that overflowed from his cup. It was my honour and privilege to drink from his cup.

He was my greatest mentor. The contribution he made to the psychology profession and more specifically to educational psychology often remains inconspicuous as it was overshadowed by his contributions as an educationist. I will never forget as a novice researcher how he took me under his wings and mentored me in complicated statistics. After a long and hard day at work he will sit with me until midnight loading all my data onto to his computer and complete the statistical analysis with amazing precision. I can honestly say that he set my path in the field of academia and a scholar of note.

He mentored me as a psychologist, and he was one of the best I have ever known. I could call him any time of day or night to seek advice on a complicated case and he will give the most brilliant advice. Not many people know that he lectured and supervised individual and family therapy at Wits. Over the years he mentored numerous people. As a community psychologist he left a legacy in many communities. As busy as he was, he always made time to empower communities through the numerous community empowerment programmes he often involved me in such as the Centre for Peace action in Eldorado Park or the community building projects in Soweto. He was truly a people's psychologist.