

An Interview with Macalane Malindi: The Impact of Education and Changing Social Policy on Resilience during Apartheid and Post Apartheid in South Africa

Macalane Malindi and Michael Ungar

Macalane Malindi, Ph.D., was born in 1967 in Lindley, in the Free State Province of South Africa. Despite the death of his parents and then an elder brother who looked after him, he still managed to graduate from high school in 1988. When his elder brother died, his sister-in-law and uncles helped him attend university where he completed a Bachelor of Arts in Education and a Bachelor of Arts in Psychology, then a Postgraduate Diploma in Education and finally his Ph.D. in 2009. He now resides in Bethlehem in the Free State Province and is a senior lecturer in the Department of Education at North-West University where he built on his experience as an educator and guidance consultant in the community prior to starting his doctoral studies.

Malindi's story, from his father's conflict with his boss of the farm where he worked (he bought a car and his boss fired him) to Malindi being forced to leave school to support himself and his family, unfolded against the backdrop of the Apartheid system and the changes it went through. As a successful young academic, Malindi gives much back to his community and is involved in research projects concerned with the study of resilience in South Africa. His own story informs what resilience means to him. That includes fulfilling one's obligations toward one's family, the

importance of faith, and the necessity for changes in social policy (specifically, policies related to education) that promote social justice. All these things, Malindi suggests, are necessary to make it more likely that children will do well.

This interview was recorded in January, 2010.

Macalane: Mine is a family of five. I have 3 daughters. My eldest daughter is 14. The second one is 10, and the third one is 8. My wife is an elementary school teacher in Lindley in the Free State Province where I was born. I teach at North-West University, Vaal Triangle Campus, in the school of Educational Sciences. I'm a Zulu-speaking South-African. My father was a farm worker, but he lost his job. The main reason was that he managed to buy a car for 600 Rand, which is about 90 dollars.

Michael: I don't understand. How did that cause him to lose his job?

Macalane: Because he bought the car, tension developed between him and the farm owner. Perhaps the farm owner was jealous that one of his black workers bought a car. Then one afternoon my father was told to pack and go because "...jy dink jy is nou baas" meaning "...you think you are the boss now." But my father was very proud of what he had done. My father always told us this story with a little bit of embarrassment. Embarrassment that he lost

M. Ungar (✉)
Killam Professor of Social Work,
Dalhousie University, Halifax, NS, Canada
e-mail: Michael.Ungar@dal.ca

his job and he was the bread-winner. But he was also very thankful because although he lost his job, he was able to go to a semi-urban area where he was able to send us to school. When my brother and I went to school, we already knew how to read and my father was the one who taught us how to read.

Michael: How old were you when you began school?

Macalane: I was already 8, and my brother was 11 when we went to school for the first time.

Michael: What education did your father have?

Macalane: My father had primary education. He could only go up to Standard Four at that time. Then he had to leave school because my grandfather passed away and my father had to go and work on the farm so that he could support the family.

Michael: In the late 1970s, there was no education for children on the farms?

Macalane: There were schools on some farms. Even today, some farms do not have schools but children on such farms attend school on neighboring farms. In the small town where my father went, there was only one school and many learners. The school couldn't accommodate everybody, so churches were sometimes used as classrooms. My sub-standard A [Grade 1] classroom was a church building. The church was divided into two. Grade one faced north and Grade 2, which was my elder brother's class, faced south. So each teacher taught on their side of the same church building. Sometimes it would be difficult to hear everything since both teachers taught at the same time.

Michael: Did you have textbooks?

Macalane: Yes, but not enough. This school was, as I said, very big. We actually sat on benches, with no tables, and if we had

to write, we would kneel down and use the same bench we sat on as a desk. We would share books. For example, 2 or 3 pupils shared one book. Educational resources were unequally and inequitably distributed among schools serving children from different race groups. This was in line with the policy of Apartheid.

Michael: Were your teachers well enough trained?

Macalane: Yes, some of the teachers were qualified. Some of these teachers were only teaching with their standard 8 or standard 10 qualifications. But, again, I think it was a question of a shortage of teachers at the time. Even those who were qualified had received poor training at colleges of education designed only for Africans.

Michael: And your father, from his perspective, he thought this was a good educational experience that he could give you?

Macalane: Yes. Not many parents were literate enough to be able to evaluate the system. Parents used to motivate children to go to school because it was clear that education was needed anyway.

Michael: So your father found work in the city. And your mother?

Macalane: Actually, my mother and father separated when I was very young, but I stayed with my father.

Michael: Is this different from most families when there's a break-up?

Macalane: I'm not sure whether it was culturally accepted at that time, but it did happen, not only in my family, but in a few other families I knew of. In my family, my brother and I were left with my father and then my grandmother took care of us from then on. That is until my father remarried a year before I went to school.

Michael: I see.

Macalane: I didn't know my mother very well until I was much older. By then my

father had remarried. I think a year before I went to school. At that time, he was working as a construction worker and then he learned about land surveying. He also learned about engineers. He actually wanted me to become a land surveyor. My brother was what we call a “gifted child” these days. His IQ was superior and he could read on his own. Most of the things that a teacher would want to teach he already knew. For example, he would read the Bible on his own and especially in high school, he read widely on his own.

Michael: But your father really wanted you to get an education?

Macalane: Yes, he motivated us a lot. In fact, when he looked at our results, he would be so proud that his children had the highest marks in class. And he would point at me and say, “One day you are going to become a land surveyor” and point at my brother and say, “You are going to be an engineer.” So we grew up with this idea that we would become somebody even if we couldn’t pronounce the words or understand what those people did.

Michael: Did your father ever talk about what motivated him to ensure his children got an education?

Macalane: I just knew that my father wanted me to be something that sounded very, very, very good. So although we didn’t know anything about what he meant, we did know that we should become someone very important. We would be very important people if we became what my father wanted us to be. He actually passed away when I was 15 due to Tuberculosis. After he passed away, my step-mother had to start working to support the family. She had to take over and become the bread-winner. She worked as a domestic worker, earning 85 Rand per month. My grandmother was still

alive then, but she was very old. She was 83. Her pension and the money that my step-mother was earning were barely enough to take care of all our needs. Then, in 1983, my grandmother passed away and the situation got even more difficult for our step-mother. So in 1984, my brother and I had to drop out of school because there wasn’t enough money to pay for our school fees and to buy the books that we needed.

Michael: Your step-mother and grandmother were able to keep you in school, even after your father died and money was scarce?

Macalane: Yes, but it was not easy at all. This was very important to them just as it had been for our father. My brother and I dropped out of school at the end of 1984. I was 17. We had to go and look for work because my stepmother could not afford to keep us in school. This was a year after my grandmother passed away.

Michael: What grade did you leave?

Macalane: I had passed standard 7, which is grade 9 and my brother had just passed standard 8, which is grade 10, both of us with flying colors. I was employed before my brother, as a construction worker, like my father. I worked around people who were older than me and a lot of them had not had opportunities to go to school and qualify. So I was the second highest qualified employee. The other person had only finished standard 8, so we were the only ones who could read, write, understand English, and Afrikaans. So we used to interpret quite a lot for others.

Michael: Could you earn enough money to save and go back to school?

Macalane: No. I was paid fortnightly. I used to earn 118 Rand and 2 cents.

Michael: So every 2 weeks you’d earn 118 Rand...

Macalane: and 2 cents, yes.

Michael: So every 2 weeks you'd earn about \$18. Less than \$500 a year. Did I just do the math right?

Macalane: It wasn't enough to be able to save anything. Towards the end of 1985, my brother was employed as a police officer. There was political instability all over the place, so the government was recruiting more people to serve as police officers attached to municipalities. The reason was to deal with riots and the violent political activities that were taking place at that time. Houses belonging to people suspected of being spies or informers were being torched, police officers' houses and those of councilors' were being torched. Although my elder brother joined the police, he didn't want to become a police officer. Anyway, he decided to join the police since he did not have many employment choices.

Michael: Even though he was a very bright man?

Macalane: Yes. Soon after he joined the police force in October 1995, I decided to stop working as a construction worker and go back to school to finish my education and he was very excited about that. So I went back and I finished my Standard 8, my Standard 9, and my Matric. My brother was able to finance my studies. Other things also changed. The government put more money into educating us black, young South Africans and parents did not have to buy text books anymore. It became easier for many parents to educate their children because they only had to buy stationary. Still, some children dropped out of school. The law that children had to be in school was there, but it wasn't applied very strictly when it came to black South Africans.

Michael: I see.

Macalane: When I was in Standard 10, I told my brother that I wanted to become a

lawyer, not just a land surveyor as my father had wished. And he agreed to support me but he died as a result of an accident in 1988. The car he was driving overturned and he died later in hospital. That actually set me back a little bit again.

Michael: I would imagine.

Macalane: But I was very fortunate because my brother's wife knew exactly what I wanted to be and she said, "Your brother wanted to educate you. He has passed away. I am going to take over." I had already been admitted to university. She was also a police officer. So she sponsored my university education. My cousin also contributed. My undergraduate studies depended heavily on the bursary which I received. Although I didn't become a lawyer, I had an opportunity to study and qualify as a teacher. My cousin and sister wouldn't have been able to finance my law studies.

Michael: You've done very well in the field of education.

Macalane: I received my degree in 1992. And I got married in 1995.

Michael: Can you talk about how you met your wife? Often our relationships are significant to what we do in life.

Macalane: Yes. I was a footballer [soccer player], and the football team for which I played, was semi-professional, run by teachers and ordinary members of the community. One of these people was a reverend. His house actually served as our clubhouse. He had a niece and each time I went there I would look at her and...

Michael: He was a reverend?

Macalane: Yes...

Michael: The reverend's daughter!

Macalane: He treated her like his own daughter. I actually thought she was his daughter at first. He didn't know. Nobody knew. But since I was the team captain I went to his house more often.

His niece and I became acquainted and I think I fell in love with her.

Michael: Oh, this is lovely.

Macalane: My uncles negotiated with her family for her hand in marriage.

Michael: Your father's brothers...

Macalane: Yes.

Michael: ...went and negotiated with her family, the reverend...

Macalane: Yes, yes.

Michael: ...for the marriage.

Macalane: Yes, for her hand in marriage.

Michael: Did you have enough money to marry?

Macalane: Yes, I was a teacher at that time. I was able to pay *amalobolo*?

Michael: What's *amalobola*?

Macalane: It's part of my culture. Long ago, I think even before my grandfather was born, if a young man wanted to marry a young girl, the young man's family would actually take cattle to the family of the young lady as a sign of appreciation for the good work they had done by bringing this girl up. It is a symbolic gesture to join the two families. But since people lost cattle, they now use money. It's actually a phrase: *izinkomo zamalobolo*. In other words, these are the cattle, money in my case, that my family sends to my fiancé's family in order for us to get married.

Michael: I appreciate your story very much. But how do you account for your success?

Macalane: For me and many other young boys the community was there. There were people in the community who served as role models who guided us. This played a role in our development. And our extended families played a role too. If a father in one particular family passed away, uncles supported the family to the best of their abilities. Even though parents passed away, or were working in other cities away from home, there were still father and mother figures for us. In my case, the

mother figure was my grandmother after the divorce of my parents. When I think of my grandmother, she played a very, very important role as a mother figure during my childhood. I miss her a lot, especially these days, because I'm sure she would be very proud to see what I have become.

Michael: Can you talk a little about how she influenced you?

Macalane: Yes. She gave me my initial religious upbringing and I have kept it throughout my life. I'm still a very religious person. And she taught me everything: norms, values. She was very strict though. I realized the reason why my father was such a responsible man. It is probably because of the strict upbringing that she gave him.

Michael: What were some of the other values that she gave you?

Macalane: After my father and mother separated, we were left in her care. She played every role that my mother would have played if my mother and father hadn't separated. She gave us all the love that we needed. She gave us all the care that we needed and she actually supervised our behavior. She taught us respect. She motivated us to go to school, although she had forgotten how to read and how to write at that time. There is an interesting story of how she would wake us up very early in the morning. Sometimes, on Saturday, she'd forget that it was Saturday and she would very quickly wake us up and ask us to get ready for school. And we would have to tell her, "Grandma, it's Saturday. It's not Monday, It's not Friday. It's Saturday." She wouldn't even laugh at herself. She would just say, "Okay, sleep then."

Michael: And your church? How big a force is the church in your life?

Macalane: My church played a pivotal role in my life as a child. My grandmother would not let us stay home on Sunday without

going to church. I had difficulty playing football because sometimes we would go and play football on a Sunday afternoon, and my grandmother would say, "You can't go and play football on that day." But the team that I played for was run by teachers among others and they made sure that all the children who were in their care in the community as members of the football team were well behaved. They made sure that we didn't smoke. They made sure that we didn't drink. They made sure that we didn't do drugs and, in fact, they went out of their way to tell us about the dangers of all these things.

Michael: Really?

Macalane: So our team was a very special team in the sense that the children that played for this team, all of us never smoked, all of us never drank until later in life. Although there were other football teams in the township where I grew up, ours was very special. That was why we were able to grow so strong and disciplined as children. And what is interesting is that when I look back at my peers who played football with me, some of them became teachers. My role model is also a teacher who was actually my football coach at school. He's still alive at the moment and I got an opportunity to say thank you to him for being my mentor after I got my Ph.D.

Michael: And your church?

Macalane: My church is the Methodist Church and I have been in this church since I was born. I learned that there is another higher power and that person is actually in charge of our lives, that our lives are actually meaningful because He is there for us. I have never been able to separate my life as a footballer, my life as a teacher, and my other roles as parent or husband, from my faith.

Michael: What you are telling me is very profound. I know you study resilience

too, and what I'd like to ask you is what do you think actually makes a difference when a child faces adversity?

Macalane: Using myself as a case study, I would say those children who believe that they have the potential to become someone, coupled with other people around them who make them believe that they can become someone. I think those are the strong forces that propel us.

Michael: So it was really the people around you, and your church, that helped you get through. I'm curious, did your teachers play a role too?

Macalane: Yes. Our teachers used to tell us that we had limited opportunities, looking at the political situation in our country at that time. But they always made sure that there was no police officer listening. They always told us that because of the political system in the country we had limited options, but if we didn't have some kind of education, our options were going to be even more limited. They taught us that even under difficult circumstances, education, even bad as it was, could be one's salvation, if I may use that religious concept. Salvation lay in us being able to obtain some kind of education, even though it meant limited career opportunities. They motivated us a lot.

Michael: What would have happened if the police were listening?

Macalane: They could have been arrested and detained.

Michael: Which part of what they said was the illegal part?

Macalane: It could be interpreted as a political statement.

Michael: That you have limited options?

Macalane: Yes, because that was true.

Michael: But you weren't allowed to say that you had limited opportunities.

Macalane: Well, the Apartheid system was designed to make sure that we didn't have enough options in life as Africans, so making a statement like that would

amount to a political statement. It was very, very dangerous.

Michael: Can you tell me more about how the Apartheid system put limits on you.

Macalane: We can start with the school system itself. You'd find schools which did not have a curriculum for math and science. In other words, the children who matriculated at that school only would have one curricular option. History being the main one, followed by, for example, biology and geography or biblical studies. The school where I matriculated was like that. There was no science curriculum at matric level. So that means you can't become anything which requires science subjects if you follow a curriculum like that. That practice had a long history starting from the time of Hendrik Verwoerd, the Apartheid Prime Minister who was assassinated 6 years after he miraculously survived an earlier assassination attempt. Let me read you what he said [his words are quoted in Brian Lapping's *Apartheid: A History* (1987)]: "There is no place for [the Bantu] in the European community above the level of certain forms of labor ... What is the use of teaching the Bantu child mathematics when it cannot use it in practice? That is quite absurd. Education must train people in accordance with their opportunities in life, according to the sphere in which they live." It seems we were not supposed to be educated to very high meaningful levels of education. That's why there were jobs that we wouldn't even think of doing. Nevertheless, many Africans managed to reach high levels of education and we admired them.

Michael: Can you give me some examples?

Macalane: There was an act called the Job Reservations Act, which meant that some skilled jobs were reserved for whites. This Act was supported by the

Education Act which meant that Africans were not to receive good, quality education that would enable them to hold certain high positions. The education of African children was aimed at ensuring that they could serve their own people in line with Apartheid. The Act was aimed at eliminating what was considered unfair competition.

Michael: What happened after 1994 and the end of Apartheid?

Macalane: 1994 gave a lot of people hope that things were going to be different. But I don't think we realized the magnitude of the task of changing everything that needed to be changed. I grew up in a shack which meant that housing was a problem for Africans. Townships were severely underdeveloped and we did not have access to clinics, for example. We didn't have enough hospitals too. These and other amenities were segregated according to race. Our schools, hospitals and few clinics were not as well resourced as those that served other population groups, especially whites. We had schools that were built of mud and even those didn't have enough classrooms. That legacy persists since we still have schools where children are educated in temporary buildings or old dilapidated school buildings. And then we have schools where they don't have proper toilet facilities, especially in rural areas. Others don't have libraries. Those are some of the imbalances that we still have at the moment. But I think life will surely improve because we see our housing program has speeded up. We see infrastructure being developed, especially in rural areas. But the problems are being made worse by the fact that a lot of people are moving away from rural areas to urban areas. So urbanization, which couldn't happen before because of the Group Areas Acts and the Pass Laws, is now causing

problems. The influx control legislation was aimed at keeping people in what were called their “homelands.”

Michael: Thinking about your own daughter now who’s 14, what are your thoughts for her future as a postapartheid child?

Macalane: At the moment, opportunities are available. I put her in one of the best schools in the country. I always tell her that “I educate you so that you can be independent, so that you don’t have to depend on someone else to make a living.” My daughter tells me that she wants to become an architect.

Michael: This is an opportunity that is open now?

Macalane: Yes, opportunities are there. My university education is an opportunity too. I went to university in 1989. The Vaal Triangle where my university was situated was politically unstable at that time. There was a lot of political violence and the government was unable to contain it. The African National Congress and Inkatha Freedom Party were at loggerheads and many people lost lives due to the violence that resulted. If one was suspected of belonging to the ANC one could be executed very easily. In the township, you could be shot dead, you could be banned, because of, for example, suspicion that you belong either to one group or the other. You could be killed or burned alive. Some people were mysteriously killed during night vigils or in their homes. In spite of these occurrences, the fight for freedom did not stop, pointing to the resilience of South Africans of all colors who opposed Apartheid. I lived in this township and I used to commute to the university. One night, our house was attacked while I was studying for my psychology test the following day, but to this day we are not sure who attacked us. Not much

damage occurred and no one was injured at all.

Michael: What motivated the attack?

Macalane: I think it was political. My sister-in-law was a police officer. So the police officers were actually targets of the ANC-aligned youth. In this case, we were surely mistaken for the “enemy.” We were able to resolve whatever was the problem and lived peacefully in the township afterwards.

Michael: Sounds very dangerous.

Macalane: When I was in my final year this violence actually intensified, especially in June while I was writing my semester exams. The ANC-aligned youth would round us up so that we could help patrol the streets, “to make sure that our mothers” as they put it, “and our sisters were not attacked.” As I said, people were attacked and killed at night in their homes. So there I was, in the middle of exams, I was supposed to be studying, and instead I was patrolling the streets in the night in the area. A lot of youth were carrying machine guns and weapons such as knives. And there I was, patrolling with them with only my fists and nothing else. I couldn’t refuse to go. Politically the country was very ungovernable at that time.

Michael: And in 1994, how did things change?

Macalane: Before 1994 we did feel like, “Wow, with all these political negotiations taking place, we are being liberated,” but I think the actual liberation took place when we cast our ballots. I was very excited.

Michael: Had you not voted before? There was no voting at all for blacks?

Macalane: No, no, no. Not for us Africans. We couldn’t vote at all, so for all of us it was a very exciting day when we voted on the 27th of April, 1994. We really felt that we were citizens of this country. I made sure that I voted in every election since then.