Grade 12
Civil Resistance
The Role of the Youth in the Struggle
What is the role of young people in the process of changing and transforming South African society?

You may think that your community leaders, parents, teachers, priests and chiefs are not willing to listen to your point of view, but young people have always been involved in the struggle in one way or another. They have often remained nameless and their stories forgotten.

The grandmothers and grandfathers that are now living in our communities were once young people. Recollections of their youth are a vital key in piecing together the lost and forgotten histories of South Africa.

We need only remember the student uprising of 1976. At a time when most of the leaders of the liberation movement were either in jail or in exile, it was the youth that reignited the struggle in South Africa. This student uprising called the youth of South African to action and brought about the beginning of the end of apartheid.

Young people can play a significant role in changing the world. Think about #feesmustfall. Think about the actions of environmental activists such as those in Greenpeace. Think about Gay and Lesbian Pride marches. Young people are often out there on the edge of social change.

The early years of the struggle

Before looking at the role of youth in the 1970s and the 1980s, it may be useful to get an understanding of what preceded the ‘turning point’ of those decades.

From as early as the 1920s young people were participating in the youth wing of the CPSA and were already staging protests in schools. These protests reached a climax in 1946 at Lovedale College. One hundred and fifty-two students were arrested and charged with public violence. They were barred from entering any school in the country after that. This did not stop students all over the country from striking, boycotting and rioting. These extreme forms of protest only happened after students had tried to speak to the authorities and represent their grievances in a peaceful manner. Being heard has often been a challenge for young people in South Africa.

The ANCYL established in 1944 contributed significantly to giving the youth a voice. The Youth League’s Programme of Action employed boycotts, strikes and other defiance tactics. When the ANC embraced this programme in 1949 it was transformed from a small group of intellectuals and leaders into a popular mass movement. This prepared the way for the Defiance Campaign of 1952 and the Congress of the People in 1955. No longer were black people trying to become part of a system that excluded them, rather, under leadership like that of Anton Lembede and Nelson Mandela, they were determined to replace the system altogether with something radically new.

The Youth League’s manifesto said,

“Africans must struggle for development, progress and national liberation so as to occupy their rightful and honourable place among nations of the world... African Youth must be united, consolidated, trained and disciplined because from their ranks future leaders will be recruited...”

After the National Party came into power in 1948 it began to reduce the quality, scope and financial support of education for black people. A turning point in youth politics was seen in 1949 when students expressed their solidarity with nurses at the Victoria Hospital, joining them in a 14-day sit-down strike.
In 1953 the government passed the Bantu Education Act that reduced the quality and narrowed the focus of the education black people could receive, “in accordance with their opportunities in life.”

In opposition to this the Freedom Charter of 1955 expressed the ideals of a fair and just education system. Amongst other things it proclaimed that:

“The doors of learning and culture shall be opened! ... All the cultural treasures of mankind shall be open to all, by free exchange of books, ideas and contact with other lands... The aim of education shall be to teach the youth to love their people and their culture, to honour human brotherhood, liberty and peace.”

The Freedom Charter of 1955 was an attempt to create a shared vision for a multi-racial South Africa. The government responded by arresting 156 leaders, charging them with “high treason and a countrywide conspiracy to use violence to overthrow the present government and replace it with a communist state”. The Treason Trial lasted nearly five years. As many Youth League leaders were among the accused, there was a period of decline in its activities.

There were also some Youth League members, like Robert Sobukwe, who disagreed with the non-racial values of the Freedom Charter. He believed that Africa’s problems should be solved by black Africans. In 1958, Sobukwe and others broke away from the Youth League and formed the PAC. On 21 March 1960, at a peaceful PAC protest demanding the abolition of the pass laws, police opened fire on protestors, killing 69 and wounding close to 200 people. Most were shot in the back. In response to the Sharpeville Massacre, some ANC leaders, including Chief Albert Luthuli, Walter Sisulu and Nelson Mandela, publicly burnt their passbooks.

In the 1950s and 1960s many African states won their freedom from colonial powers. This was an incredible inspiration to young people in South Africa. The 1960s were, however, a difficult time. After the raid on Liliesleaf and the subsequent Rivonia Trial the leaders of the liberation movement, including Mandela, were charged with sabotage and sentenced to life imprisonment. Others, like Oliver Tambo, were working in exile.

**The turning point**

The South African Students’ Organisation (SASO), led by Steve Biko and the philosophy of Black Consciousness, emerged to fill the youth movement gap towards the end of the 1960s. SASO took the lead in continued resistance to apartheid.

The philosophy of Black Consciousness emphasised self-esteem and made black people responsible for their own sense of liberation. Biko believed that freedom for blacks was first and foremost a freedom from the psychological oppression of their own ‘inferiority complex’. Only once this freedom was secured could black people fight for freedom from the oppression of the white apartheid government.

“We are aware of the terrible role played by our education and religion in creating amongst us a false understanding of ourselves. We must therefore work out schemes not only to correct this, but further to be our own authorities rather than wait to be interpreted by others.”

Steve Biko ‘The Definition of Black Consciousness’. A paper produced for a SASO Leadership Training Course in December 1971

It was Black Consciousness that inspired the student uprising of 1976 that reignited the liberation movement within South Africa. Students were protesting the quality of education and the use of Afrikaans as the language of instruction in black schools. The government reacted with levels of
violence never seen before. Between June 1976 and October 1977, 700 publicly recorded deaths occurred and hundreds of protestors were imprisoned.

The state’s brutal response to the students’ uprising forced thousands of youth into exile. This swelled the ranks of MK and the PAC’s APLA, originally known as Poqo. Many were sent into training camps in Africa and in Eastern Europe. They returned as trained cadres of MK’s June 16 Detachment.

After the banning of SASO in 1977 students were looking for a new movement. The late 1970s saw the creation of numerous local youth groups associated with powerful and openly political national structures – like the South African National Students Congress (SANSCO) and the Azanian Students Organisation (AZAPO). Many youth groups joined the national high school student organisation, the Congress of South African Students (COSAS). In the 1980s COSAS played a major role in mobilising young people.

In the 1980s there was a groundswell of protests all over South Africa – consumer boycotts, strikes and school boycotts. The UDF, launched on 20 August 1983, gave these diverse protests one face, or front. This united front offered a way for any social, political, cultural organisation to join the liberation struggle, including church groups, sports clubs, youth groups, COSAS, SANSCO and the National Union of South African Students (NUSAS). Their shared vision was “To create a united, non-racial, non-sexist and democratic society”. This huge united front was a greater challenge to the state than fragmented protests could ever be.

It was the participation of nearly all student movements in the Education Charter Campaign in 1984 that raised the profile of student politics in the eyes of the liberation movement. Young people became major players in South African politics – often risking imprisonment, torture and death. Demands around education were inseparable from the demands for a democratic South Africa and schools were encouraged to create politically active SRCs. This was expressed in the slogan “Liberation Now, Education Later!” By 1985 school boycotts, the main strategy of the youth movements, left schools unworkable and ungovernable. COSAS was banned in mid 1985, but continued to do work and un-banned itself in 1989 as part of the the National Union of South African Students (NUSAS).

Student movements played an important role in breaking down barriers of race between young people. Many white university students had their worldview challenged as a result. During this period white men were forced by law to be part of the Defence Force’s pro-apartheid activities – both on our borders and in our townships. Some white youths joined the End Conscription Campaign and became conscientious objectors. They were shunned by their white communities and faced prison sentences.

One of the most significant ways that young people of all cultural groups could get involved in the struggle was through art and music. These were important tools for the UDF. Slogans like, “Forward to People’s Power” and “Arm Yourselves with Knowledge for Freedom” were printed on to millions of T-shirts, banners, pamphlets, posters and even stickers. Their message was not only heard locally – it echoed around the world.

As Nelson Mandela put it,

“We [the prisoners on Robben Island] realised that the propaganda being issued in the form of posters and other material contributed a great deal to the sharpening of people’s perceptions and developing their ability to articulate their ideas and aspirations”

Young people were very involved in promoting resistance culture – through developing drama, dance, music, newsletters, T-shirts and posters. Young resistance artists were supported through workshops organised by the Community Arts Project (CAP) in Cape Town and the Silkscreen Training Project (STP) in Johannesburg.

As time went on the UDF established a uniquely South African visual vocabulary of struggle, such as the ANC’s spear and shield, and iconic pictures such as that of Hector Pietersen from the 1976 Soweto Uprising.

In 1991, following the unbanning of the ANC, the ANCYL was revived to mobilise the youth behind the ANC vision of the country’s future and to look after their socio-economic interests.

The South African Schools Act of 1996, passed by the democratically elected government, finally removed the segregation and discrimination of the apartheid education system. Now all young South Africans have the right to access quality education.