

Shifting selves: The emergence of new identities in South African schools

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Abstract

This is an exploratory study on the nature and extent of racial integration in South African schools in the post-apartheid period. While there is vigilant media attention to occasional, dramatic incidents of racial conflict in white schools, there is very little research on the ways in which student identities are framed, challenged, asserted and negotiated within the dominant institutional cultures of former white schools. The research findings suggest that student identities are shaped and framed within stable institutional cultures that remain impervious to change despite the changing demographics of the student body; but that even under these conditions student identities are constantly being questioned and recast as black and white students begin to engage each other in the daily routines of institutional life.

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Keywords: Curriculum; Educational policy; International education; Educational administration; Identity; Race

1. Introduction

In South Africa, “race remains the primary point of reference” (Soudien, 1994, p. 56; Soudien et al., 2004). Under apartheid, race interpretations not only pursued the path of the discredited theory of fundamental nature, but also in doing so, played a key role in human rights abuses. In an attempt to protect and rationalise economic and administrative privilege and power of the minority white population, four essentialised racial classifications were legislated: White, African, Coloured and Indian¹

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¹The terms Coloured, White, Indian and African derive from the apartheid racial classifications of the different peoples of South Africa. The use of these terms, although problematic, has continued through the post-apartheid era in the country. In our paper, we use these terms grudgingly to help present the necessary context for our work.

(Moodley and Adam, 2004). The latter three have been further homogenised through the common representation of blackness, and consequently, in post-apartheid discourse, the black experience (Potgieter, 2002).

To ensure continued supremacy, whiteness was fabricated and presented as morally, intellectually and biologically superior contrasted to blackness as subaltern. In accordance with the prevailing mentality, identities were presented as rigid and fixed. Education reflected this segregated and inequitable environment, with every aspect of schooling regulated according to race (Carrim, 1998; Sayed, 2001).

The need for rectification and parity in all aspects of education was thus a necessary imperative in a new, democratic education system (Sayed, 2001). Since 1994, various policies have been developed and legislation enacted to encourage the process of desegregation [read: integration] in the schooling

system of South Africa. The South African Schools Act (Act no. 37 of 1996) catalysed by the Bill of Rights and the South African Constitution, formalised the desegregation of schools in South Africa, and created the opportunity for students from diverse cultural backgrounds to attend schools of their choice. It was hoped that in creating this opportunity, students would become integrated into the whole school environment and the seed of a new society will be sown.

Although the above policies set the stage for desegregation to unfold at schools, by establishing the physical proximity of members of different groups in the same school, it did not go further to interrogate the quality of contact; not only in the personal attitudes of students and teachers but also in the institutional arrangements, policies and ethos of the school (Sayed, 2001, p. 254). As a result, 12 years down the line schools in South Africa are “still grappling with the apartheid legacy of separate and unequal schooling” (Moletsane et al., 2004, p. 61). Instead of becoming models of societal integration (Jansen, 2004), schools have continued to reflect the hegemonic dominance of whiteness that characterised pre-apartheid schooling and as a result racism has continued unabated (Vally and Dalamba, 1999). Studies have indicated that popular culture has further entrenched the polarities of whiteness and blackness. In an attempt to regain lost power and privilege in a post-apartheid South Africa, research showed that white students reformulated their personal and collective identities through an illusory link to Europe. Eurocentric popular culture was seen to be emblematic of white privilege and protection (Dolby, 2000). Black popular culture became a yardstick in interpretations of whiteness as through the negation of blackness, white students were able to reconstruct a “global white” identity unrelated to the nation–state (Dolby, 2000).

Earlier studies in this field most notably that of Dolby (2000, 2001, 2002) and Vally and Dalamba (1999) explores how South African youth make meaning of the idea of race. The Vally and Dalamba (1999) report uncovered overt forms of racial practices and youth identity that centred on the issue of “them” and “us”. Dolby’s studies have shown that in the new context of globalisation, fashion, style, and ultimately “taste”, compete with “ancestry” and “geography” as pivotal variables in the elaboration of youth identities.

There is however, very little research on the ways in which student identities are framed, challenged,

asserted and negotiated within the *dominant institutional cultures* of former white schools. Accordingly, this study asks: What indeed is the nature of student relationships and interactions within the school, and to what extent has the school organised itself to provide positive relations among black and white students?

The following research questions guided this study: (1) To what extent has the ethos of these schools been transformed towards integration in the truest sense and how do students perceive this in practice? (2) Are new forms of self-identity beginning to emerge?

The argument is presented as follows. I begin by outlining from current research a conceptual framework on the reinvention and renegotiation of the construct “race”. I then describe the sample and context and the research methodology that was implemented. The development of themes that emerged from interviews is subsequently presented. I conclude with an analysis and discussion of findings and examine ways in which schools have elected or omitted to adopt certain strategies with the “opening” of racially exclusive schools in South Africa.

2. Some conceptual clarifications

2.1. *Reinventing and renegotiating the construct of “race”*

Interrogating the concept of race has been and still is a problematic transnational discourse (McCarthy et al., 2003; Winant, 2000; Nieto, 2000; McCarthy and Crichlow, 1993). During the early years of the 20th century, Du Bois and Boas proposed a revolutionary interpretation of race, debunking the traditional theory of race as an essential biological “truth” (Winant, 2000). Rather, race as an inconstant socio-historical construct dictated by economic variables, was proposed and is now a widely accepted view (McCarthy et al., 2003; Dolby, 2000, 2001; Winant, 2000; Nieto, 2000; Carrim, 1998; McCarthy and Crichlow, 1993; Morrison, 1993). Hence, any study seeking to insert “race” as an analytic category in the social process needs to problematise race as socially, historically and ideologically constructed, rather than accept it as a biological or physical fact. As Roediger (2003) writes, “race” is constructed differently across time by people of the same social class, and differently at the same time by people whose class positions differ.

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