REFLECTION AS A TOOL FOR MANAGING
DIFFERENCE IN A POST-APARTHEID
SCHOOL

by

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ABSTRACT

Public schools in South Africa have been officially desegregated for over 15 years, yet there is unease about the lack of any real transformation within previously single-race schools. The prevalence of assimilationist practices, particularly in previously white schools, suggests a reluctance to transform the school in order to make it a truly South African space. Significant changes have occurred at the level of policy but translation into practice at the school level has been slow. Additionally, the compromises made during the transition to democracy and the inordinate powers awarded to school managers and governing bodies have allowed schools to rearticulate racialised identities and work against the proclamations of a non-racist society (Soudien & Sayed, 2004).

This thesis describes an intervention conducted at an ex-Model-C school in the Eastern Cape with a group of eight volunteer teachers. The purpose of the intervention was to encourage teachers to reflect more critically on the practices in their school that discriminate against learners in terms of race, gender, class and culture. The eight teachers met with me over a period of 18 months during which they were encouraged by means of various readings, tasks, and discussions to reflect critically on the dominant practices within their school.

A critical discourse analysis of transcriptions of teachers’ and students' interviews and 13 focus groups indicates strong traces of colonial and apartheid discourses that position ‘Others’ in deficit ways. An awareness of this Othering by certain teachers over the period of 18 months suggests that deficit discourses can be ruptured when awareness is created and alternative discourses are constructed. The thesis attends to the way in which, through the construction of a safe space for regular reflection, the teachers involved in the research identified gendered, classed, and racialised practices in their school and attempted to transform one of these practices, namely the detention system. However, attempts to make material adjustments to this highly discriminatory practice at the school resulted in the withdrawal of management’s support for the research project, without which very little could be changed.
This thesis supports literature that indicates the difficulty of implementing change within schools and the need to address fears and identity issues among those involved in the change. Furthermore the thesis illustrates that, while positive shifts occurred on an interpersonal and personal level, they were obstructed at the level of management. This suggests the need to involve staff from the school management more closely during an intervention.

The thesis also argues that, given their heavy workloads and administrative duties, most teachers are unlikely to have the time or inclination to engage in critical reflection, which is seen to be an essential component of good teaching. However, the research shows that under the appropriate conditions, teachers can be encouraged to reflect critically and to act meaningfully on those reflections. What is essential is that teachers be encouraged to interrogate the influence of their own social, political, religious, and personal beliefs on their teaching practices, and how these impinge on their ways of talking about the differences they encounter.

Critical reflection is more likely to occur if teachers are provided with a safe space within a group, where they are able to articulate and contest dominant representations and practices. Difference within the group, in terms of race, gender, age, experience, and political inclinations, appears to assist with critical dialogue. So, too, does the presence of an outsider/researcher who provides various materials and activities to prompt the teachers to rethink their beliefs and practices and in so doing, to re-signify their naturalised practices and assumptions.
DECLARATION

I declare that this work is totally my own and that it has not been handed in to any other institution.

Signed: ..........................................................  
Date: ............................................................  

iv
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My special thanks go to the headmaster and teachers at ‘Model C Ordinary’ who let me into their school and generously shared personal and institutional information with me.

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to the wonderful teachers with whom I worked. They courageously volunteered to join me in examining practices in their school that required time, effort and strong emotional resolve. Despite the energy and commitment needed, the teachers plunged themselves wholeheartedly into the project.

In particular, the thesis is dedicated to ‘Zander’ who became seriously ill during my time at the school and had to leave the project. Her courage and the perseverance she showed during this time was truly inspirational.
PUBLICATIONS BASED ON THIS RESEARCH

Publication in an accredited journal

Chapter in book series

Reviewed Conference Proceedings

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>i</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DECLARATION</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEDICATION</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PUBLICATIONS BASED ON THIS RESEARCH</td>
<td>vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION</strong></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1 Background</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2 Origins of the Research</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3 Aims and Research Question</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.4 Choice of terminology</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.5 Constructing a third space</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.6 Thesis overview</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW</strong></td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1 Introduction</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2 Discourse</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3 Understanding Difference</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4 Facilitating change in schools</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5 Reflection</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.6 Thirdspace</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CHAPTER THREE: METHODS AND METHODOLOGY</strong></td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1 Qualitative methodology</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2 Case study</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3 Research site</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.4 Choice of participants</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.5 Data collection techniques</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.6 Validity and reliability</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.7 Coding of data</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER SEVEN: DISCIPLINARY SYSTEMS AND NORMALISING RITUALS

7.1 Introduction 192
7.2 Why the focus on detention? 192
7.3 Detention data 194
7.4 Technologies of control 195
7.5 Normalising techniques 207
7.6 Latecoming 208
7.7 Uncivilised behaviour 211
7.8 Conclusion 217

CHAPTER EIGHT: CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

8.1 Difference at Model C Ordinary 218
8.2 Teachers and Reflection 220
8.3 The effects of encouraging reflection 220
8.4 What facilitated critical reflection 222
8.5 Limitations of the research 224
8.6 Significance of the research 226

REFERENCES

LIST OF APPENDICES
Appendix: Information Letter
Appendix B: Teacher written consent form
Appendix C1: Semi-structured in-depth interview
Appendix C2: Semi-structured in-depth interview 2
Appendix D1: Learner consent form (English)
Appendix D2: Learner consent form (English)
Appendix E: Sample Questions for Group Interview of Pupils who Frequently Attend Detention
Appendix F: Diversity grid
Appendix G: Humour task
Appendix H: Gender reading
Appendix I: Pupil detention system copy
Appendix J: Non-negotiable classroom rules
Appendix K: Teachers’ copy of detention system
Appendix L: Copy of records of DT learners
Appendix M: Observation schedule
Appendix N: Whole staff feedback

LIST OF TABLES
Table 1: Details of Teachers involved in the Focus Groups  66
Table 2: Resources used for information  76
Table 3: Coding of Data.  82
Table 4: Data Collection via Analysis Techniques  88
Table 5: Essentialised categories of difference  104
Table 6: Opposite poles of the binaries of ideal learners  106
Table 7: Binaries of us and them  108
Table 8: Teachers’ fears  140
Table 9: Pronoun categories from meeting management  147
Table 10: Reaction to the prize-giving  155
Table 11: Contrast between the reality and ideal classroom  188