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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: ……

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I would like to acknowledge my supervisor, Professor Hilary Janks, for the excellent manner in which she supervised this research. I feel privileged to have had an opportunity to work with someone I admire and respect for both her academic expertise and her high integrity. Professor Janks has, through her enacted pedagogy, provided me with an exceptional example on how postgraduate supervision entails far more than simply supervising the thesis. My induction into the community of independent researchers has taught me not only the 'tools' of research, but also the social, political and identity issues that accompany this journey. So, too, have I discovered the essential role that the supervisor plays in constructing a space which allows for the take-up of various identities and discourses.

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.

Then I would like to thank my family. My husband Paul constantly inspired me and urged me to keep going. He diligently read each chapter and gave me critical feedback the following day. He never once complained about the long hours and many years that I spent in front of the computer. He never complained as I talked endlessly about my research, trying to make sense of what was emerging and difficulties I was encountering. Instead he encouraged me and often took on the role of father and mother to ensure that our boys' needs were more than adequately met.

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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

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Chapter in book series

Dornbrack, J. (2006). Discovering difference: An intervention at a public high school in post-apartheid South Africa in Redesigning Pedagogy: Reflections on Theory and Praxis in Bokhorst-Heng, W., Osborne, M. & Lee, K (Eds)

Reviewed Conference Proceedings

Dornbrack, J. (2005). *Disordering and reconstructing in a post apartheid public high school*. In May, S., Franken, M & Barnard, R. (Eds). (2003) Refereed Conference proceedings of the 1st International Conference on Language, Education and Diversity. Hamilton, University of Waikato,, New Zealand.

Dixon, K & Dornbrack, J. *They said we were the Impossibles: how discourses and regimes of disciplinary practice construct subjects in a desegregated South African school*. Paper presented at Learn Conference July 2007. Witwatersrand University.

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